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A Practice-based Research Project on Game Art

Arne Kjell Vikhagen



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When Art Is Put Into Play

A Practice-based Research Project on Game Art

Arne Kjell Vikhagen

Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Digital Representation (digital gestaltning) at Valand Academy, Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg.

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To my daughters Juni, Vera and Astrid

Abstract

Title: When Art Is Put Into Play: A Practice-based Research Project on Game Art

Language: English

Keywords: Game Art, Computer Games, Video Games and Art, Play, Artistic Research, New Media Art.

When Art Is Put Into Play: A Practice-based Research Project on Game Art is a practice-based research project that aims to contribute to the understanding of the relation between play and art from the specific perspective of computer-based Game Art.

This is done firstly through the production of nine works of art that through their means of production all relate to Game Art as it has come to be known in the last twenty years or so. Secondly, the relation between games, play and art is discussed from a Game Art perspective.

This project as a whole aims to map and exemplify cases where Game Art successfully inherits rule-systems, aesthetics, spatial and temporal aspects from computer games.

This work has in turn resulted in a provisional response to the question of the possibility for Game Art to successfully create a state of play, whilst still maintain agency as a work of art. The claim is that the friction between art and play makes it doubtful that art can maintain its agency as art through play. This claim is made as a result of the artistic process leading up to the works of art that were made as a part of the thesis. It has been strengthened through the study of the concept of play and how it relates to artistic practice.

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Arne Kjell Vikhagen

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1 Introduction

*One can say that in the past the artist played to win and so set the conditions that he always dominated the play. The spectator was positioned to lose, in the sense that his moves were predetermined and he could form no strategy of his own. Nowadays, art is moving towards a situation in which the game is never won, but remains perpetually in a state of play.*¹

Roy Ascott

Our understanding of the complexities of computer games, and their impact on culture, is still in formation. For example, Espen Aarseth, from the online journal *Gamestudies*, suggests: “2001 can be seen as the **Year One** of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field.”² Even if games and play have arguably played a role in art making since long before the existence of computer games, over approximately the last twenty years games have increasingly become a part of our culture, and artists now incorporate games into their artistic practices. The first published anthologies about what I refer to in this text as ‘Game Art’ were Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta’s *GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames* in 2006, and Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke’s *Videogames and Art*, the first edition from 2007.³ Game Art has been discussed extensively in articles and conferences before that, especially since the turn of the millennium. Nevertheless, our efforts to understand computer games and their relation to art in particular, and culture in general, have only just begun. Scholars from different fields take interest in games because of their impact on culture: psychologists use them for therapeutic purposes, teachers use them for learning purposes, and

1. Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace : Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness*, ed. Edward A. Shanken (University of California Press, 2003), 112.

2. Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Gamestudies.org* 01 (2001), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

3. Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta, eds., *GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames* (John & Levi, 2006); and Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke, eds., *Videogames and Art* (Intellect Ltd., 2007).

1 Introduction

architects use them for visualisation purposes. Similarly within the arts, games are used for making art:

In this thesis, I contribute to the understanding of the relation between art, play, and games by using, appropriating and modifying computer games from the perspective of artistic practice. Through practice and reflection, I explore what happens when we incorporate play and games within works of art: through my own artistic production in the form of computer games; a mapping of Game Art through the discussion of relevant examples; and a reflective, conceptual analysis through which I examine the relation between art and play—specifically in relation to the use of games and computer game technology in contemporary art production. I contend that the agency of art and the state of play are not necessarily achievable at the same time, or for the same audience. On the other hand, computer games are excellent tools for creating and enforcing rule-systems, as well as modelling environments.

I chose to work with Game Art for several reasons. I have played and to a certain extent programmed computer games since I was a child, and my fascination for games led to the choices I have made in my art practice. With my educational background—mainly philosophical aesthetics and fine art photography—my artistic practice slowly evolved toward Game Art. In many ways, my skills and interests have converged into this thesis, practically through a Game Art practice, and theoretically through the discussion of games, play and art.

The way games and play have developed and taken their place in our culture has to do with the introduction of the home computer, the game console, and lately, the smart phone. At this point in time computer games are one of the biggest entertainment industries, with independent developers coexisting with mainstream game publishers.⁴ Game development tools are cheap or free, and available for everyone who wants to learn how to develop games. These tools have been used not solely by game developers, but also artists, architects, teachers, and others for their own purposes. Games have become prevalent in culture, leading to their use as material for artistic appropriation.⁵ Artists that are ‘gamers’

4. Maria B. Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk, “Is Every Indie Game Independent? Towards the Concept of Independent Game,” *Gamestudies.org* 01 (2016), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://gamestudies.org/1701/articles/morrisette>.

5. Axel Stockburger, “From Appropriation to Approximation,” in *Videogames and Art*,

make art with games, just as artists have appropriated media technologies in the past. This project seeks to map and demonstrate the area where games, play and art meet.

1.1 The Structure of the Text

The next chapter, *Art and Games*, both defines and delimits the field of inquiry for the project as a whole. Contemporary artists and artworks are discussed together with historical examples, creating a contextual framework for contemporary Game Art. I discuss key components such as rule systems, aesthetic components, and playable works of art. Rule systems afford opportunities for cheating and subversion, and I discuss how Game Art uses rule systems against themselves as a way to disrupt play or engage in critique. As a whole, the chapter aims to discuss works of art with a connection to Game Art, and how this connection broaden our understanding of ludic art.

Following the mapping of Game Art, chapter three—*The Question of Artistic Research and Methodology*—discusses the methodology of artistic research and how this discussion has informed my method of inquiry, especially concerning the relation between practice and reflection. Ideally, I see the works and this text as equal in terms of knowledge production, and my attempt has been to let them inform each other throughout the process. I suggest an approach that focuses to a lesser degree on the content of my works of art, preferring instead to give weight to the way they have been made, the ‘how’ if you will. The media-specific approach I take aligns with my curiosity for combining games, play, and art, falling in line with the main purpose of the thesis, which is to further the understanding of the relation between them. Also, I attempt to outline a harmonising view on artistic research that is based on the knowledge production of artistic production, and that this knowledge production is similar to how academic knowledge production is conveyed in other fields of knowledge, such as the humanities.

Chapter four, *Exhibited Works*, contains descriptions of the nine artworks I have produced and exhibited as an integral part of this project. Each of them represents a certain approach to the Game Art genre. They each intend to explore and investigate the relation between play and art by variously using rule-systems, aesthetic content, computer-based

ed. Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke (Intellect Ltd., 2007), 28.

game technology, and narrative structures derived from or referencing computer gaming. These nine exploratory works each aim to illuminate and represent an artistic way to work with Game Art. They instantiate, in different degrees and modes, the attitude of play or the state of flow, achieving agency as works of art. These works disclose key problems and issues in the production of Game Art that are further elaborated in the text. The aim for this chapter is to supply the thesis with a documentation of artistic efforts to support the discussion of the thesis. In that sense, this chapter is referred to in earlier chapters, and it can be read independently from the general text. I have chosen to place this chapter after discussing the methodology in chapter three in order to emphasise that the works were made through the methodological context presented there. These works will be referred to throughout the text, so this chapter can provide a reference if a more elaborate description of each work is needed.

Chapter five, *Art and the Concept of Play*, concerns the relationship between art and play, especially in ludic art—that is, art that aims to maintain a state of play. As such, this chapter contains the main discussion of the thesis, and ends this exploration of Game Art with the question that has evolved as a result of the study: can play and art coexist in one and the same work of art? In order to shed light on this question, I attempt to juxtapose presumptions about the agency of art and the presumptions of ‘free’ and unhindered play. The thesis ends with final remarks and a brief summary.

1.2 Clarifications and Limitations

What follows is a brief list of clarifications of concepts that I use, and some of the topics that are outside of the scope of this text, even if they are related to the field of study. The list is based on feedback and comments from the presentations and lectures I have held throughout the years on this topic, as well as current discussions within the fields of art theory, philosophical aesthetics and game studies.

- I use ‘viewer’ to describe the person experiencing the work. I am aware that the word itself might give the impression that I consider art is viewed rather than experienced, which is not the case. This is done to simplify the reference to the art audience, and in this way I am following the practice of Claire Bishop in her book *Installation*

Art, that I discuss later (see page 14 and onward). A ‘viewer’ could also be referred to as spectator, user, participator, producer or co-author of art. When I refer to a ‘player’ I refer to someone who is playing a game or engaging in play. The separation between a player and a viewer is not entirely easy to maintain, but when the aesthetic experience of art is discussed, I use ‘viewer’ instead of ‘player’.

- My use of the word ‘art’ refers largely to the way George Dickie defines it in his institutional theory of art.⁶ In my understanding, this entails that art is that which is intended to be art, and which is validated as such by institutions of art. This arguably circular definition excludes artistic expressions that do not take place within some form of art institutional context. Consequently, this also means that there is no inherent property about a certain object or an activity that makes it art, besides its contextualisation and validation by the art world. I do not think that this understanding of art is critical for the claims I make in this thesis, nor do I think it is vital to critically examine this definition within the scope of this text. But it narrows the discussion, especially considering the many artful and artistic activities that take place in the world of game design. My intention is not to lessen the value of these activities, but to give the scope of this text, and to emphasise that art is not defined by its constitution, but rather its context. For instance, a ‘work of art’ is not limited to mean a physical object or a representation, but to include the whole spectrum of practices that makes up our understanding of contemporary art.
- I distinguish between a ‘still’, or ‘film still’, and a ‘screenshot’ when I describe the images included in the text. A screenshot is taken of someone playing a game, whereas a still is taken from an animation or a movie where there is no player interaction.
- The term ‘aesthetic’ and its different forms are used to refer to aesthetics as the principles of art rather than the visually pleasing or beautiful. In other words, aesthetic aspects of Game Art do not primarily concern the visually appealing aspects, but rather the whole totality of our experience of Game Art.

6. George Dickie, *Aesthetics: an Introduction*, Traditions in Philosophy (Pegasus, 1971).

1 Introduction

- My use of ‘traditional’ art in the context of art history I refer to the modernist tradition of art. I use traditional in this way to discuss the contrast between the old and the new, but I am aware that this is a simplification that risks being counter-productive, since it tends to describe what came before as more homogeneous and consistent than it really was. On the other hand, it is important to consider how art has changed when we discuss theories of art that do not account for these changes.
- There are throughout my work references to death and violence, and I exploit the way the first-person shooter genre in computer games use the notion of dying and living as a token of failure and success. It is beyond the scope of this text to discuss the relationship between the prevalence of violent computer games and if this is related to violent behaviour in real life. It is however a topic that has been brought up on several occasions during lectures and presentation.
- To define what play is has proven to be notoriously difficult, but there are some perspectives to play that are not discussed extensively in this text. These perspectives concern aspects such as the notion of playfulness in the artistic process, and play as source for inspiration and creativity. Similarly, the text does not discuss the use of ludic activities to add randomness, chance or forms of obstruction either as a part of the art-making process or as components in works of art. Neither do this thesis concern itself with play as a way to introduce humour and lightheartedness into the process of making art. These perspectives are important in their own right, and deserve far more attention than what is relevant for our discussion, which in the context of play is focused on art’s ability to maintain a state of play for the viewer, and what this might entail for our understanding of art.

2 Art and Games

It is time to incorporate advances in technology to create mass-produced works of art, obtainable by rich and not rich. Works where the artist puts as much quality into the conception and the manufacturer as much quality into the production, as found in the best handmade works of art.

Öyvind Fahlström

The aim for this chapter is to define and describe key characteristics of Game Art by discussing examples of works of art that directly or indirectly are associated with Game Art. I have included artworks that pre-date computer based Game Art so as to connect its brief history to works and practices that came before it, discussing briefly how they relate to computer-based Game Art. Game Art has its predecessors, and through selected examples I will show, most extensively through the work of Öyvind Fahlström, how Game Art is an extension of a practice that preceded the now widespread computer game culture.

The topics and examples in this chapter have been selected as they were important for my art making process as examples of works that relates to games, and as such they create a framework for the project as a whole. From the beginning and onwards, I had to deal with questions such as: in which ways are Game Art works perceived by a viewer? How does Game Art relate to its site, or place? How does Game Art use rule systems from games, and how does that relate to subversion, through not following these rules, or through cheating? The examples and connections that are made in this chapter aim to contribute to the understanding of key aspects of Game Art, such as the role of the spectator and the spatial properties of games as they are projected on a two-dimensional surface.

Furthermore, the rule systems of Game Art are discussed, particularly how they lend themselves to subversive behaviour both from the artists' and the viewers' points of view, through cheating and breaking the rules, or at least revealing the borders of gameplay out into plain sight. These

examples will serve as ways to get a more considered and analytical understanding of what it means for art to have a ludic component, or to inherit aesthetic elements from games. They, and their siblings in the world of art, contribute to the understanding of Game Art. Before this, we will establish a contextual framework for the inquiry by suggestion a definition of Game Art.

2.1 Definition of Game Art

Game Art in this text is referred to with different names, such as *art mods*, *art games* and *hacker art*. I have chosen to use *Game Art* as a general term in this text, since it has become a predominant name for this specific art form, even if the above mentioned terms are also used in literature about Game Art.¹ For instance, Tiffany Holmes suggests the following definition for *art game*:

... I apply the term ‘art game’ to describe an interactive work, usually humorous, by a visual artist that does one or more of the following: challenges cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner. To be more specific art games contain at least two of the following: a defined way to win or experience success in a mental challenge, passage through a series of levels (that may or may not be hierarchical), or a central character or icon that represents the player.²

This definition is useful for a particular type of Game Art, but in my opinion it is too specific. For instance, Game Art is not always interactive in the instrumental sense, which means that someone is providing input to the work and getting a reaction back. Some forms of Game Art do not use the ludic character of computer games either. Instead they inherit or derive aesthetic elements from computer games. For instance, I consider art made as so-called Machinima to be a form of Game Art, even though a Machinima work is an animation or a film—not a computer game as such, but animation made by manipulating or modifying

1. The question whether computer games themselves can be art or not is not part of the discussion in this thesis, as the focus lies on artworks that are intended for an art context.

2. Tiffany Holmes, “Arcade Classics Spawn Art? Current Trends in the Art Game Genre,” in *Melbourne DAC2003* (2003).

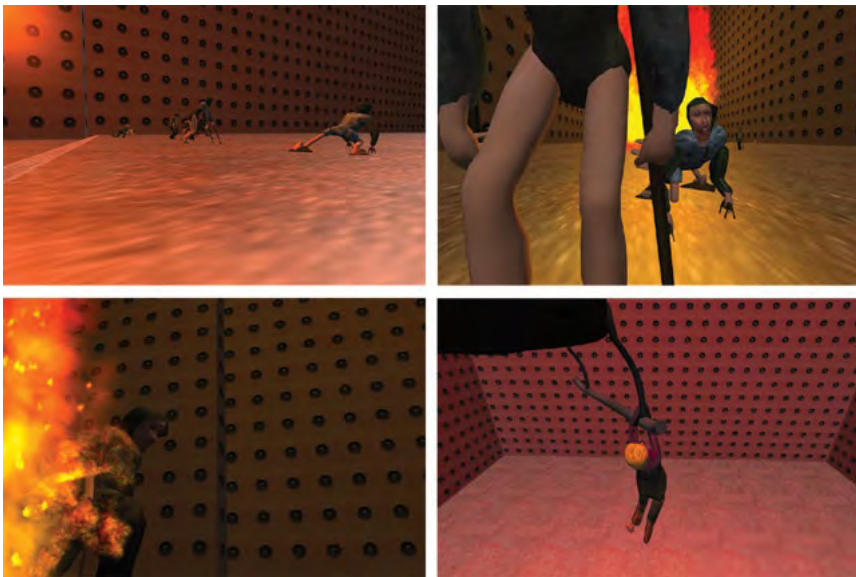


Figure 2.1: Film stills from *Exit*, Magnus Wallin, 1997. It is an animated Machinima piece that borrows the aesthetics, and to a certain degree the story, of a computer game: the objective of the characters in the piece is to save themselves from a fire by getting on a helicopter.

game engines, or simply by recording gameplay to create animated film. They leave the interactive element of the game behind and instead use its aesthetics. For instance, the artworks *Q3* (1999) by Feng Mengbo and *Exit* (1997) by Magnus Wallin (see Figure 2.1) are examples of works that I argue are Game Art, even though they are neither strictly interactive nor apply the rule systems of computer games.³ These examples are not a form of Game Art that aims to be playable. They are not ludic, if you will, but their relation to the performance of play is intriguing—*Q3* and *Exit* have performative aspects as they are the results of someone else playing a game, even though their acts are planned ahead of time, or manipulated in order to create a narrative. The important thing is that these works offer the possibility for the viewer to relate to the actions within the narrative of the protagonist within the Machinima piece. I discuss this in more detail when we discuss installation art later on, and in the description of my piece *Too Close for Comfort* in chapter four. Game Art that primarily relates to the ability to create animations and narratives from game engines rather than using the rule system of games, are interesting for us since there is a ‘play by proxy’ aspect to the Machinima pieces that I will discuss in more detail later (from page 81 and following).

If we compare a playable work such as *Museum Meltdown* (1996) by Pelle Thorsson and Tobias Bernstrup to Mattias Nordéus’ piece *Maria & Zelda* (2006) (see Figure 2.2 and 2.3) we can clearly see the difference in approach. In *Museum Meltdown* Thorsson and Bernstrup reconstructed museums by recreating them within a modification of the computer game *Duke Nukem* from 1996.⁴ Nordéus’ sculpture elegantly connects commonly known meta-narratives in games with the familiar iconographic depictions of Maria and Jesus. In his sculptures, he has substituted the holy child with Zelda, a game character which is also the saviour of the people in the very popular *Zelda* game series.⁵ In the game series, Zelda, unknowingly at first, responds to a dire situation and gradually discovers that she is in fact pre-destined to fulfil the wishes of her people. Nordéus relates this narrative to the story of Jesus Christ and the narrative of the

3. Feng Mengbo, *Q3*, Machinima, 1999; Magnus Wallin, *Exit*, 1997, accessed August 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3qJYur-CBA>; There is also a catalogue published by Uppsala Art Museum that describes Wallin’s early work. See: Magnus Wallin, *Physical Sightseeing*, Exhibition catalogue (2000).

4. *Duke Nukem 3D*, 3D Realms, 1996.

5. The *Zelda* series consists of a host of games released from 1986 onwards for Nintendo consoles. Rodney P. Carlisle, ed., *Encyclopedia of Play in Today’s Society* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 358.



Figure 2.2: Screenshot from Museum Meltdown, Palle Thorsson and Tobias Bernstrup, 1996. The museum space is replicated in a game engine. The first-person shooter game is still there, with guns and enemies that need to be defeated before the player can visit new rooms in the museum.



Figure 2.3: *Maria & Zelda*, Mattias Nordéus, 2006, 31 x 21 x 40 cm, oil on wood sculpture.

New Testament. The polygonal sculpture mimics the crude graphics of early 3D games, creating an almost humoristic reference to the ancient masters. In this way, Game Art such as *Maria & Zelda* has different connections to games than rule systems.

With this difference between playable and non-playable Game Art in mind, and at the expense of Holmes' definition that is based on an interactive component and functioning rule systems, I have chosen to follow the suggestion from Mattias Jansson to use Matteo Bittanti and Domenico Quaranta's definition of Game Art—with a slight modification:

Game Art is any art in which digital games played a significant role in the creation, production, and/or display of the artwork. The resulting artwork can exist as a game, painting, photography, sound, animation, video, performance or gallery installation.⁶

6. Mathias Jansson, *Game Art—samtidskonst inspirerad av dataspelens estetik, teknik och kultur* (Mathias Jansson, 2008), 5–6; Bittanti and Quaranta, *GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames*, 9.

Bittanti's definition is useful in the sense that the *intention* of a Game Art piece is important—we can expect that it is intended to be an artwork and not a computer game.⁷ It might look like a game, and it might use the rules and interactive structure of a computer game, but the intention behind a Game Art piece is to be a work of art and not a computer game *per se*. In fact, a work of Game Art might not even look like a computer game, or use an interactive structure, but could still be a form of Game Art. The main point is that these works, in one way or another, derive or inherit elements from computer games, whichever those elements might be. In this way, Game Art is *derivative* and not *constitutive* in its relation to games, in the sense that Game Art might not really be games as such, but rather art. This intention plays an additional role, as it says something about which context the work relates to, and which actors and institutions are meant to validate it.⁸

As Bittanti's definition also suggests, the resulting Game Art piece does not have to be computer based. I consider this to be a particularly useful approach, especially when we consider earlier artworks made before the digital age. As much as I am aware of the fact that the term 'digital' is used by Matteo Bittanti in his definition, I have chosen to also include artworks that are not influenced by digital games only, but by games in general. The reason is that it makes us able to connect Game Art to artists and artworks made before the emergence of digital games. I claim that pre-digital art has so much in common with digital Game Art that it not only should be included, but that thinking in this way will also enable us to consider the art history of Game Art by linking to its pre-digital history.

Supporting a definition of Game Art that can include pre-digital artworks corresponds to Bittanti's assumption that Game Art can also result in analogue artworks. It is thus reasonable that even games that are not digital would be included in the definition, in order to correspond to the assumption that Game Art itself can be analogue. Some support for this approach can be found in media historian Lisa Gitelman's view of

7. Furthermore, Bittanti suggests to use the term 'Game Art' with capitals, a practice I will use throughout this text, so as to avoid confusion with game art, which usually describes the graphical imagery of computer games. He also chooses to define Art Games as a sub-genre of Game Art, where the work itself is to a large extent similar to a game, where at least two of the following three criteria are met: rules for winning, different levels, or a character that represents the player. Bittanti and Quaranta, *GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames*, 8.

8. Stockburger, "From Appropriation to Approximation," 26.

media archaeology as disconnected from its connections to technology, depending rather on the way media archaeology is ‘read.’ “Media archaeology is first and foremost a methodology, a hermeneutic reading of the ‘new’ against the grain of the past, rather than a telling of the histories of technologies from past to present.”⁹ This way, we are reading media into history and not the other way around.

It should also be noted that when we discuss Game Art in this text, the main purpose of the term is to confine the discussion to art that relates to play and games, and not to suggest there is a certain form of art that is Game Art which uniquely separates it from art practices in general. I am sceptical towards using media specific markers as indicators to make distinctions between different art forms, such as media art, video art, and so on, but at the same time it is a very useful way to limit a discussion to specific aspects of art, just as in the case here with Game Art. I sometimes refer to Game Art as a genre, as I find that term more fitting, but I want to emphasise that my use of Game Art as a term is to limit the scope of our discussion within the field of art, rather than to support the idea that Game Art is something distinct in itself from art.

2.2 Game Art and Installation Art

We will now turn to the notion of viewer participation and activation and another aspect that is relevant to the understanding of Game Art: spatiality. Throughout the process of developing the artworks presented in chapter four, I was constantly reminded of the challenge of how to present a Game Art piece in a gallery. In which space does the piece reside—the gallery space, the game space, or both? How will the game space relate to the gallery, which itself is a complex site for the public viewing of art? I have found that the relation between the viewer, the space, and the work is better understood by making parallels to theories of installation art. More specifically, we will discuss *presence*, *decentring*, and *activation*, as they are laid out by Claire Bishop in her book *Installation art*. These are useful even for the understanding of the role of the viewer as participant or even constituent in Game Art.

The way installation art relies on the viewer’s presence as a vital role in the fulfilment of the work is something that is connected to how my

9. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New - Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (MIT Press, 2006), 11.

own work, and Game Art in general, activates the viewer by means of its character of play.¹⁰ The focus is not necessarily on a work's theme or material, but on the *experience* that the work provides.

This perspective, that the artwork rather tries to move focus from the work's representative to its performative qualities, is the connection that I find crucial. In the words of Bishop: "Instead of *representing* texture, space, light and so on, installation art *presents* these elements for us to experience."¹¹

It is important to point out that this is not a property that is exclusive to installation art. In the same way that installation art is dependent on the viewer's initiative and participation, traditional modernist paintings rely on the viewer in a similar manner, even if it is not accentuated. The difference is rather that the activation process is not only visible—Bishop uses the term 'optical contemplation'—but also that the area to which the work is directed is different. The viewer's participation is required to realise the work in the sense that their approach is active and not passive.¹²

Installation art also connects to Game Art through its intricate relation to the space it claims to occupy. For example, several of my works are projections of a digitally represented space, and as such they can be viewed independently from a specific location or site—the space that the game represents is a spatial component in itself, together with the actual space it resides in. If we consider, as media theorist Martin Lister suggests, the virtuality in classical central perspectival paintings, where the work certainly can be said to represent a virtual space on a two dimensional surface, then Game Art aims to create a space with features that are far more sophisticated than a static surface.¹³ The game installation works in two spaces: the game space and the gallery space. Sometimes they are intertwined, and sometimes they strongly contrast each other, both situations have specific bearings on the work. The ephemeral quality that

10. Bishop separates between an 'installation of art' and 'installation art' on the basis of the artwork's intentions. An installation of art is representational—installation art has an emphasis on the viewer's experience, even though there is a fine line between them. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: a Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005), 6.

11. Ibid., 11.

12. For instance, there is a significant difference between Internet art that utilises the Internet in such a way that it could not be realised without it, and art that is presented online through documentation.

13. Martin Lister, *New Media: a Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 132–133.

certain installations have, as they are fixed to a certain point in time and a specific site, is something that also categorises Game Art. The digital environment on which computer games depends is ephemeral, just as is the space occupied by installation art—it appears only when the viewer activates it. The work promises fulfilment for the viewer if they choose to engage and explore the work.

Claire Bishop uses two concepts to describe the viewer's experience when meeting with installation art, which are particularly important for understanding the relationship between Game Art and installation art: *activation* and *decentring*.¹⁴ The viewer is activated through the exploratory characteristics of installation art, as it cannot be fulfilled without the viewer moving around and participating in the space the work represents. This reflects an instrumental attitude to activation: since the viewer's pattern of movement in relation to the work matches her relation to the environment in general, a link is created between the work and the world, which gives the work its vital connection to what is outside of it, a link for which it cannot exist without. It opens up a relationship between the work and the viewer that may have social, cultural, and political implications. Although this form of activation is important and relevant, I would like to propose a perspective that is somewhat expanded in terms of what the viewer experiences as activating.

Installation art has the potential to give the viewer a particular sense of experiencing the work with the whole body, and not just from an ocular-centric point of view. But the experience is also contemplative: that our bodies can move freely within the work also has consequences for how we experience the work. Installation art has the ability to create a framework for participation, a situation where the work and the viewer meet at the same contemplative level. The work is not situated 'in front of,' but rather 'in here.' In this way, the communication model *artist—work—viewer* converges, with consequences for both the artist and the viewer. The lack of control over what the work is able to communicate is not clearer than in this situation, as participation and activation also imply the viewer taking influence and power over the work itself, on the artist's behalf. The immediate communication between the work and the viewer, where the artist is more or less clearly pulling the strings, is not apparent in this process. At best, there is a parity between the viewer and the artist, but this relationship will always be indirect and uncontrollable, in a scale

14. Bishop, *Installation art*, 11.

that far surpasses the classical, modernistic communication model.

At first glance, there are several arguments for claiming that Game Art and installation art are not at all connected. My work, which usually takes place on a screen or at best as a large projection, can hardly be said to be spatial in the sense that it claims to influence the physical space it occupies on equal terms, even with the best of intentions. In addition, there is also an immanent lack of physicality: the main components are intangible and the work's impermanent character is apparent. In spite of this, I would argue that there are connections between Game Art and installation art, and the key to this lies in the metaphoric link between the actions the viewer performs in the work's space and the potential acts the viewer could perform in her own environment. There is a hypothetical relationship between the actions and events that occur inside the work, and the actions that the viewer could be performing. In a sense, the viewer relates more to the space my works represents than to the physical space in which it resides. This idea rests on the assumption that the space the work represents is accepted by the viewer. This space is not where the viewer's body is, but instead the space the viewer occupies inside the work.

With reference to the discussion of the spatial character of Game Art it is relevant to discuss if it is appropriate to draw a parallel between the space that my work represents, and the spaciousness that Claire Bishop claims is essential to activate the observing viewer. In my opinion it is justified to make that assumption. On the basis of a work such as *Wall Enclosing a Space* (2003) by Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, I argue that spaciousness is able to activate the viewer even if the space is metaphorical, or in the case of Sierra's work, through negation (see Figure 2.4).¹⁵ *Wall Enclosing a Space* (2003) was shown at the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003. Below is a description of the piece, quoted from Sierra's web page:

A brick wall was built from the floor to the ceiling and set parallel to the entrance wall. ... The main Pavilion door remained open. At the back, only the Spanish public were allowed entry, on showing their identity card, passport or other legal identification.¹⁶

15. Santiago Sierra, *Wall Enclosing a Space*, Installation, The Venice Biennial, Venice, 2003, accessed August 1, 2017, http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200303_1024.php.

16. Ibid.

http://www.noshowmuseum.com/content/images/sierra_05_03_3.jpg

The image is a large, solid gray rectangle that occupies the central portion of the page. It is a uniform, featureless gray, representing the artwork 'Wall Enclosing a Space' by Santiago Sierra. The rectangle is positioned below a URL and above a caption.

Figure 2.4: Wall Enclosing a Space, *Santiago Sierra*, 2003. Exhibited at the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

The otherness that Sierra's work addresses by only allowing access to Spanish citizens is obtained by recreating the same social structures of control that he intends to criticise.¹⁷ But for me it is not just the work's intentions that are significant, but the strategy he chooses to achieve it: the installation space is unavailable for a majority of the work's viewers. The work's spaciousness is created by denying access to the room, which allows for a contemplative process instead, based on what the viewer thinks the room contains and how this, together with the sense of exclusion, affects the understanding of the work. The fact that the viewer cannot enter is in turn what creates the necessary framework to experience the work. If the viewer qualifies to gain access to the room, it is still secondary since it is the access itself that is the driving force in the work, and not what it contains. In this way, the work's intentions are already fulfilled before the viewer enters the room, and we can claim that the room above all serves as a kind of catalyst for the work's real intentions.

There are spatial properties in Sierra's *Wall Enclosing a Space* that remind me of the spatiality that Game Art represents. What is most important for the viewer's sense of activation is based on the extent to which the work is able to *present* a space which the viewer can relate to, even if this room is unavailable or *represented*. A Game Art parallel is a work by the Dutch artist group JODI, which consists of Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesman. Their work *Untitled Game* (2002), is a series of games which, in varying degrees, are minimalist versions of the game *Quake 1* from 1996.¹⁸ In the game *Arena* (2002) for instance, all we see is just a completely white screen along with discrete information such as points and descriptions of game events (see Figure 2.5). Although there are no recognisable objects, we get the sense of walking around even if nothing can be seen, because of the sound and certain messages such as "You got the nails," which indicates that we are moving around and picking something up. Each time the viewer takes damage the screen flashes for a bit, and we see that the energy level decreases until it reaches zero, leaving the viewer dead. Although both the visual and auditory feedback clearly indicate that we move around in a three-dimensional space—something normal at least for viewers who are accustomed to playing *Quake* or other first-person shooters games of this kind—we are deprived of the opportunity for rational action, since we are not given any points of reference.

17. Bishop, *Installation art*, 120–121.

18. JODI, *Untitled game*, Computer game, 2002, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.untitled-game.org>; *Quake*, id Software, 1996.

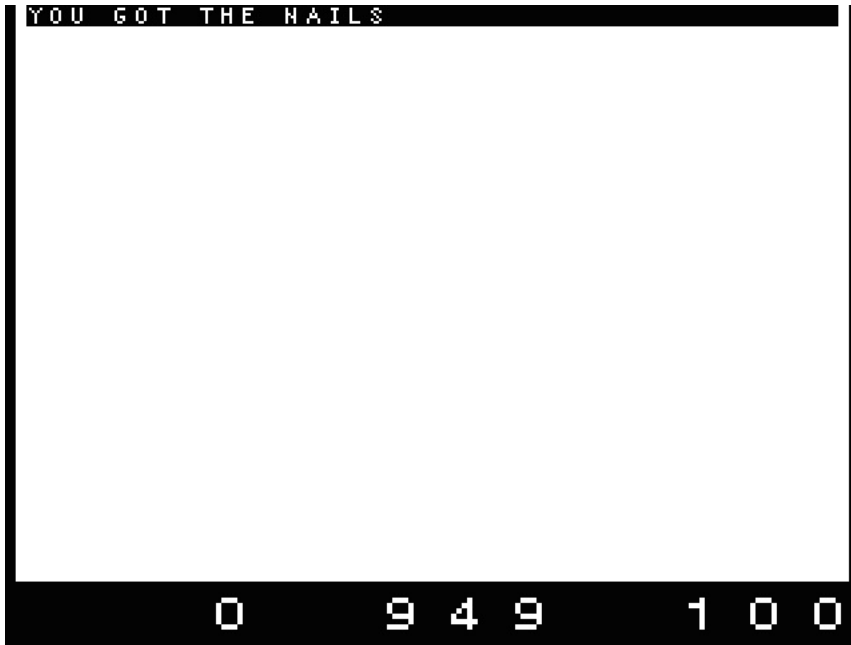


Figure 2.5: Screenshot from *Untitled Game—Arena*, JODI, 2002. The piece is a modification of the game *Quake 1*.

The work hinges on the competence of the viewer in a way that is interesting particularly in the context of this thesis, as has also been pointed out by Shuen-shing Lee: “It is important to recognize that, without direct reference to *Quake* or other such games, *Arena* would be deprived of its critical force, the sole gaming perception worth attention.”¹⁹

Also, in *Untitled Game—Arena* we are deprived access to the work’s space, and this is a significant feature of the work as well. Even if the work is minimalist in the way it tries to reduce the game down to its purest form, to the extent that only a white screen is left, there is still a strong spatial component to the work. In the same manner as in *Wall Enclosing a Space*, the space is constructed through negation—it is neither there nor available. The viewers are left to their own devices, and their ability to create coherence out of chaos is needed to be able to experience the work. Obviously, it is not coherence JODI is looking for

19. Shuen-shing Lee, ““I Lose, Therefore I Think”: A Search for Contemplation amid Wars of Push-Button Glare,” *Gamestudies.org* 03 (2003), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/lee/>.

in this work, rather the opposite. In my opinion, works such as *Untitled Game—Arena* represent a comment on the computer game's binary properties, and JODI's intention is to break down the game's rigid structures built by rule systems and the clearly defined spaces where the game takes place. Elements such as progression, perfection and gratification are there but they are not within reach. What remains is a simplification, or rather an aestheticisation, that deconstructs the rule structures of the game. In JODI's works the viewers are activated through their willingness to understand a space that is not there. To return to Bishop's concept of activation, it is exactly such an activation that occurs, even if the space that the work *presents* is not necessarily an installation that includes the whole body as such, or requires that the viewer be activated by moving around in a physical space. As in Sierra's works, the space is in spite of this a starting point that activates the viewer. Where Sierra's ambition is to lead the viewer into a new form of visibility through recreating an already visible social process, JODI's works activate the viewer through the reduction and deconstruction of a room which for most people is not known at all. It is as if the work addresses the fear of violent video games by presenting a stylized room that neither makes sense nor gives coherence to the play experience. Arguably, Sierra's work is also not without connotations of violence. I claim that the deliberate lack of coherence and cohesion in JODI's works or the negation of space in Sierra's work represents what Claire Bishop describes as the *decentring* of the viewer:

This tension—between the dispersed and fragmented model subject of poststructuralist theory and a self-reflective viewing subject capable of recognising its own fragmentation—is demonstrated in the apparent contradiction between installation art's claims to both decentre and activate the viewer. After all, decentring implies the lack of a unified subject, while activated spectatorship calls for a fully present, autonomous subject of conscious will (that is, a 'modern' subject).²⁰

The disruption of representation in JODI's works, as well as the lack of causality in the way the work responds to the viewer's actions, both contribute to decentre the viewer. The viewer's expectations, experience, and ability to imagine a space that denies representation describes fittingly the double character of decentring:

20. Bishop, *Installation art*, 131.

... installation art posits us as *both* centred and decentred, and this conflict *is itself decentring* since it structures an irresolvable antagonism between the two.²¹

As JODI's works deliberately use the viewers' preconceived approach and behaviour against them, the relation between the fixed position of the viewer and the fragmented spatial experience, the work could be said to result in both the decentring and activation of the viewer. This is a common characteristic of Game Art that in one way or another relates to the virtual space so typical for computer game genres such as first-person shooter games. In this sense, Game Art relates to the view on art's relation to its space and on its site-specific aspects that art theorist Miwon Kwon discusses in the article "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity":

In this context, the guarantee of a specific relationship between an art work and its "site" is not based on a physical permanence of that relationship ...but rather on the recognition of its unfixed *impermanence*, to be experienced by an unrepeatable and fleeting situation.²²

The institutional critique that Kwon recognises as a result of taking into account the institutional siting of art is certainly found in Game Art. The *relative physicality* of Game Art enables artists to address issues of the work's site and situation. Game Art can provide their own, internal space that makes it tremendously effective in exercising critique on the real space it is placed (such as in the work *Museum Meltdown* by Thorsson and Bernstrup) or when the work of art utilises the networked games and its popular-cultural mode of being. One example of a work like this is *Velvet-Strike* (2003) by Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon and Joan Leandre, where anti-war posters were offered to players of the popular military shooter game *Counter-Strike* to download and use as their graffiti images which they could 'spray' on the walls inside the game.²³ They also

21. Bishop, *Installation art*, 131.

22. Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (1997): 91.

23. Rebecca Cannon, "Meltdown," in *Videogames and Art*, ed. Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke (Intellect Ltd., 2007), 47–49; Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon, and Joan Leandre, *Velvet-Strike*, Game modification, 2003, accessed August 1, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2z_J7KNs8I.



Figure 2.6: Screenshot from *Velvet-Strike*, Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon and Joan Leandre, 2003.

encouraged others to share their own ‘sprays’ for others to use. In this work, the configuration of the work’s site is very complex as it takes place in a virtual space where it melts into the everyday life of gamers who have no conceptual idea of the fact that they are confronted by a work of art. Works like these question the idea of physicality and site, and show how Game Art can offer diverse and complex ways to distribute art, and to challenge the objectification of art as well.

2.3 Game Art as Performance

The early works of American artist Brody Condon represent an artistic practice where the connection to computer games is both direct and indirect. In a certain way he uses computer game aesthetics as his outset, while the intended outcome is transformed and becomes more extensive than a computer game reference can provide. For example, in his work *Death Animations* (2008) Condon placed a number of actors performing



Figure 2.7: Film still from *Death Animations* Brody Condon, 2008. Live performance.

death animations live in a gallery space (see Figure 2.7).²⁴ Death animations are the particular behaviours of a character in a game that are triggered when it dies. It has become a trope that is used to add drama to an important event in the game, sometimes ironically, or even phantasmagoric. In its most elaborate form it is similar to operatic death scenes. In addition, death animations are for the players' own enjoyment since they are no longer actively playing the game, as their character has died and cannot act anymore in the game world. The piece *Death Animations* becomes a form of re-enactment of death animations in ultra slow motion. The somewhat amusing but yet sinister death animations in games are transformed when they are played out with real people in slow motion. The viewers are able to connect to a different concept of death, far more extensive than what the game provides. A channel is opened between the stereotypical death animations in games and the agony and suffering of its potential metaphorical parallel—real human beings made of flesh and blood. In that sense, *Death Animations* is an example of a work that effectively utilises the spatial differences between the game world and the actual world in the gallery space, it is in fact this transposition that is the driving component in the work.

Death Animations is in many ways different from Condon's work *Sui-*

24. Brody Condon, *Death Animations*, Live performance, 2008, accessed August 1, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/17752376>.

cide Solutions (2004) (see Figure 2.8) which consists of a Machinima animation where Condon plays out his game character to its ultimate point.²⁵ In a collection of snippets of recorded gameplay, the work shows how the player kills himself in different ways and in different games in rapid succession. The work is not played out in real time, but the player's acts are recorded and edited together to create a narrative.

There is a slapstick element to the work that contrasts the somewhat grim undertones—many of the scenes are more about the stupidity and recklessness of the player than an active will to perform the act of suicide, but it is this balance that makes the piece interesting: through repetition and persistence, the work puts the quite harmless act of in-game suicide into a broader and more sinister context.

The protagonist in the different scenes acts out a type of behaviour that is counter-productive for both the game and the real world. The actions of the protagonist are subversive in the way that they violate the rules of the game, or rather its code of conduct—the game space is no place for players that does not follow the progression of the game. At about the same time that *Suicide Solutions* was released, I worked on a piece that had a parallel relationship to the idea of progression, and making good on the part of the game. Especially my work *...and then you die!* relates to this piece, because it turns the notion of gratification on its head. *Too Close for Comfort*, also a Machinima piece, plays to this idea as well, where the player acts counter-productively to the spirit of the game (see page 81).

2.4 Sonja Nilsson—Installation Art as Game Art

Sonja Nilsson created an installation artwork titled *Riktigt, på riktigt* (Real, for real) for her graduate project at Valand School of Fine Art, Göteborg 2000. It was also shown at the Stockholm Art Fair in 2002 (see Figure 2.9).²⁶ The viewer opens a door and enters a straight corridor containing a number of other doors which look exactly the same. It seems as if the room consists of a straight, endless corridor, impossible given the size of the gallery room where the work is presented. As we move through the corridor, we find corners with large mirrors, their reflection extending the hallway indefinitely. Around each corner there is the same, endless

25. Brody Condon, *Suicide Solutions*, Machinima, 2004.

26. Sonja Nilsson, *Riktigt, på riktigt*, Installation, 2000, accessed August 1, 2017, http://www.sonjanilsson.se/WEBSIDOR_English/gallerirotor.html.



Figure 2.8: Film stills from *Suicide Solutions*, Brody Condon, 2004. An animated Machinima piece with clips from various games where the player kills himself.

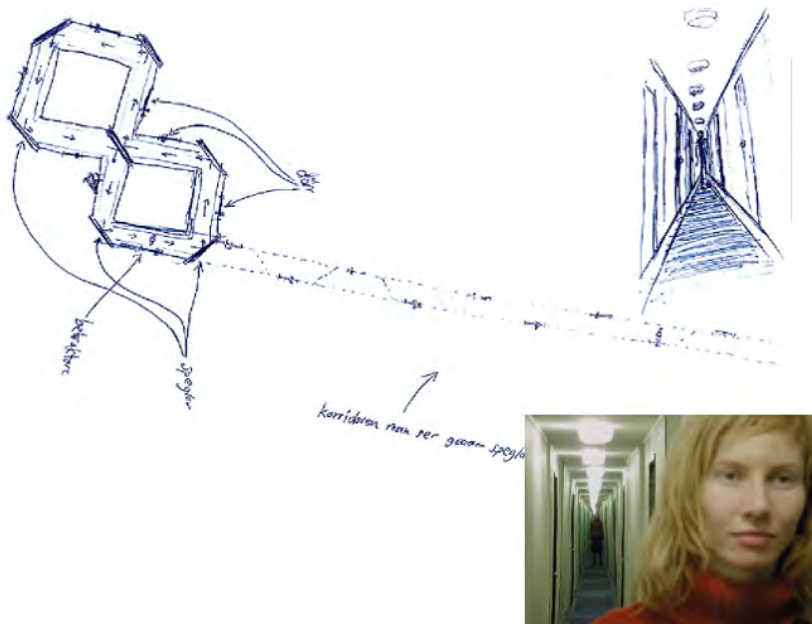


Figure 2.9: A top view sketch from *Riktigt, på riktigt*, Sonja Nilsson, 2000. Seen from above, the corridors are built in a figure-of-eight shape, with a mirror placed over each corner, giving the illusion of an endless corridor, as seen on the lower right.

corridor. By walking through the corridor, it seems that the viewer is trapped, since it becomes difficult to remember which door is the exit. All doors look exactly the same, and all of them except the exit are locked. For a short moment, the viewer is trapped inside the corridor, unable to find the exit door.

There are several angles from which we could approach *Riktigt, på riktigt* that shed light on its relation to Game Art. Firstly, the way in which the piece is fulfilled through the viewer's presence is performed by exploration. There is no immediate way to grasp the full understanding of the work just from standing at one point. The viewer has to move around inside the piece in order to relate to it. The key to the piece, that the viewer is trapped in an endless corridor, is hidden from the viewer and something that can only be realised by walking around in it. Besides the connection to computer games' aesthetics through the representation of the corridor, the feeling of being trapped comes very close to a first-person shooter game experience. The piece suggests that the viewer is given a task: 'Find the exit!' Only by moving around inside *Riktigt, på*

riktigt do viewers realise that it is their movement inside it that is the actual objective of the piece. The key is to *act*, not to *see*, and it is a fitting example of the similarities between Game Art and installation art. The physical conditions of the work's 'game space' if you like, gives the work a ludic component that resembles the classical dungeon crawler as seen in computer and board games.

Riktigt, på riktigt is employed here as an example also because it played a part in my own artistic process. The experience of walking through a door and then finding yourself in a completely different space where other rules apply was both peculiar and significant. The piece is both a trap and a maze, and I see an especially strong relation to my practice concerning this. The notion of making a piece that deliberately puts the viewer aback by short-circuiting their expectations is something I have in my works, especially in *...and then you die!* and *This monkey's gone to heaven*, which I discuss in chapter four.

2.5 Öyvind Fahlström—Art as Games

The works of Brazil-born Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström (1928–1976) are in many ways early precursors to Game Art. It is worthwhile to take a closer look at his work and see which elements still have relevance to our contemporary understanding of Game Art.²⁷ Through Fahlström's works, I will attempt to show that Game Art is not specific to computer games and the technology and culture which computer games represent. Game Art as a genre has developed considerably because of the introduction of computer games, their development and cultural impact. However, it is fruitful to connect Game Art to art history, to go back in time and reconnect to artists and their works, to view them in a different light in order to understand our current artistic expressions and genres. Fahlström shows through his work that it is possible to relate to games in a broader context. His attitude to his own work leads me to believe that in Fahlström's case

27. Celia Pearce, "Games as Art: The Aesthetics of Play," *Visible Language* 40.1 (2006): When it comes to precursors to Game Art, it is difficult to not also mention Marcel Duchamp, the artist who game theorist Celia Pearce calls the first gamer. Duchamp's involvement with chess and his practice reveals a connection to play and chance that was far ahead of his time. I have nevertheless chosen to focus on Öyvind Fahlström, as besides from being active on the Swedish art scene and less frequently used as reference than the works of Duchamp, his works are also similarly relevant to connect to current Game Art practices.

it also involves the procedural: his practice in itself lies close to games and play in general.

Fahlström produced a number of works in the sixties and seventies that have links to contemporary Game Art. He was influenced by popular culture such as cartoons and board games. In addition, he was connected to the art group *E.A.T.—Experiments in Art and Technology*, and he was one of the artists that took part in the seminal series of performance shows called *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, arranged in 1966 by artist Billy Klüver and others. This exhibition is generally considered to be one of the earliest exhibitions with a clear focus on art and technology.²⁸ In this exhibition, Fahlström contributed with a multimedia piece called *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine*, a piece that mixed installation, video, audio, and film.²⁹ Fahlström's practice generally represents a fascinating mix of techniques and approaches. His practice shows an open attitude to the work, a connection to interaction and viewer participation as well as to his ideas regarding distribution, which makes his artworks just as relevant today as when they were made, perhaps even more so. Although he shared the view on technology that *E.A.T.* represented, his works were made with traditional techniques, without using modern technology. They contained, however, elements of interaction and openness that resemble traits typically assigned to media art.

For example, if we take the work *Meatball Curtain (For R. Crumb)*, an installation Fahlström made in 1969 as a part of the Art and Technology Program at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, we can clearly see how Fahlström mixes traditional techniques and elements such as comics and games (see Figure 2.10).³⁰ In this work, Fahlström has cut out shapes of metal and plastic and placed them in a room. The piece was inspired by a cartoon by Robert Crumb, to whom the work is dedicated. In Crumb's comic, meatballs rain over Los Angeles, where those who are hit are lifted out of the everyday 'rules' and suddenly become happy and excited. Fahlström describes the work as follows:

28. Steve Dixon, *Digital performance : a history of new media in theater, dance, performance art, and installation* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 97.

29. Öyvind Fahlström, *Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, Installation, mixed media, 1966, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/kisses-sweeter-than-wine/>.

30. Öyvind Fahlström, *Meatball Curtain (For R. Crumb)*, Variable structure. Enamel on metal, plexiglass and magnets, 1969; Mike Kelley and John C. Welchman, *Foul Perfection* (MIT Press, 2003), 166.

<http://www.fahlstrom.com/installations/meatball-curtain-r-crumb>



Figure 2.10: Meatball Curtain (For R. Crumb), Öyvind Fahlström, 1969. Enamel on metal, Plexiglas and magnets.

In my variable pictures the emphasis on the “character” or “type” of an element is achieved materially by cutting out a silhouette in plastic and sheet iron. The type then becomes fixed and tangible, almost “live” as an object, yet flat as a painting. Equipped with magnets, these cut-outs can be juxtaposed, superposed, inserted, suspended. They can slide along grooves, fold laterally through joints, and frontally through hinges. They can also be bent and riveted to permanent three-dimensional forms.

These elements, while materially fixed, achieve their character-identity only when they are put together; their character changes with each new arrangement. The arrangement grows out of a combination of the rules (the chance factor) and my intentions, and is shown in a “score” or “scenario” (in the form of a drawing, photographs or small paintings). The isolated elements are thus not paintings, but machinery to make paintings. Picture-organ.

The finished picture stands somewhere in the intersection of paintings, games (type Monopoly and war games) and pup-

pet theatre.³¹

What is key here is Fahlström's description of how the work is able to generate rules for the viewer, which is a central element that connects his work to games. For Fahlström, the rules are what is invariable in the work, and which requires repetition to be established. The constellation, or rather the execution of the rules, is what forms the basis of what is variable. It is through a rule-based constellation of Fahlström's materially fixed elements the game gets its expression. Mike Kelley perhaps formulates this best through the following quote:

In ... these, his final works ..., Fahlström proclaims the "reality" of art. Historical facts are as mythic as literary constructs; art, on the psychic level, is just as "real" as this worldly data. The artist, functioning in a symbolic world, nevertheless affects our perception of the everyday world. The artist's problem is to devise games interesting enough to bridge this gap. Fahlström's work continues to stand the test of time because it does just that.³²

Fahlström's strategy establishes an interaction between the artist's symbolic world and everyday life, and it is through the rules and the game that these two meet. By highlighting the "rules of life" through displaced and absurd constellations, we could say that Fahlström makes us play with the rules, and *to treat the game as play*. If life consists of rules that do not benefit us—Fahlström was deeply engaged in the political issues of the time and was very critical to capitalist societies—we can become aware of this through displacement, as long as the rules are still getting passed as just rules. Otherwise, the criticism, which in itself was his primary focus, crumbles and becomes meaningless. The Brazilian cultural critic Suely Rolnik articulates the difference through the concepts *playing-a-game* and *just-playing*:

The difference between playing-a-game and just-playing, the urge to exist both ways, the strategies to validate these two politics of existence, have pursued Fahlström throughout his whole life, printing the directions of his way of living as well

31. Öyvind Fahlström, *Öyvind Fahlström - The Installations*, Exhibition catalogue, ed. Sharon Avery-Fahlström (Cantz Verlag, 1995), 66.

32. *Ibid.*, 25.

as his trajectory as an artist. A recurrent topic in his texts and his visual works ...a concern particularly present in his position in the system of art, the impossibility to dissociate game and play, turns Fahlström into an artist who anticipates a future.³³

In this way we have established two opposing forces in Fahlström's artistic practice which constantly work against each other. The game, with its rules, represents a life for Fahlström that equates to mere survival. Play, on the other hand, is connected to creation. Here we meet Fahlström's peculiar relationship between play and his own artistic process, which in my view extends far beyond the importance of playfulness, creativity, and spontaneity. For Fahlström, play is the only option, and also the road leading to his social criticism. In his so-called "variable structures" lies also the key to his works' relationship between play and game—structure and play at the same time. In this context, it becomes natural to look at Fahlström's works, but also his process, as an interplay between play and games—neither the one nor the other is in itself capable of fulfilling the intentions Fahlström had regarding his work, only both at the same time. Or, as Rolnik puts it:

The political importance of the playing emerges in countless ways in Fahlström's thinking and work. For instance, his proposition to make "Houses of Pleasure," an infinity of them, using abandoned buildings, instead of solid and well-behaved Houses of Culture, indicates his conception of art associated to the exercise of the playing, and thus, to a change of the attitudes in life, that includes the playful, the desire and the pleasure—art as micropolitics.³⁴

In light of Fahlström's artistic strategy and its relation to rules and play, it is not difficult to see the link to Game Art, currently represented by the practice of hundreds of artists. But it is not so easy to find an artist whose artistic practice so consistently and at such an early point in time directed his attention towards the game world, and was willing to situate his practice so far outside the art institutions, but instead closer

33. Suely Rolnik, "Öyvind Fahlström's Changing Maps," in *Öyvind Fahlström: Another Space for Painting*, ed. Jean-François Chevrier (Gateshead: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2001), 337.

34. Ibid.

to the people he tried to reach. In the quote above, we can see a different aspect of his art, which is partly linked to his desire to create the complete, or total, artwork, and at the same time was about the work's distribution. His desire to make an infinite number of "Houses of Pleasure" is not primarily an idea on such a grand scale that it at first may seem megalomaniacal, but is rather descriptive of a work that is distributive in character. "Houses of Pleasure" has a built-in idea of large-scale production and distribution:

The role of the spectator as a performer of the picture-game will become meaningful as soon as these works can be multiplied into a large number of replicas, so that anyone interested can have a picture machine in his home and "manipulate the world" according to either his or my choices.³⁵

In addition to the view of the work as reproducible and with an area of interest that far exceeds the gallery and the white cube, we see a clear determination in Fahlström's works to enable the viewer: the work will not be realised until it becomes every man's belonging. Swedish artists Palle Torsson and Tobias Bernstrup's work *Museum Meltdown* from 1996 represents a striking parallel to Fahlström's attitude toward his works.³⁶ In the text file READIT.TXT which is included with the piece by Thorsson and Bernstrup, we find the following text under the heading *Copyright/Permissions*:

Please use this map as for your own levels. Make your own exhibitions. Examine it, rip it apart and learn from it and do copy it. Don't forget that stealing is everything.

Media art was not the first art form that could be distributed and shared with others in its entirety, but we can argue that media technologies and inter-relational networks between artists allow sharing and collaboration to a much higher degree than before the days of the Internet.³⁷ Already in

35. Fahlström, *Öyvind Fahlström - The Installations*, 66.

36. Palle Thorsson and Tobias Bernstrup, *Museum Meltdown*, Modification of computer game, 1996, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=us7wLvVbIE>.

37. Richard Colson draws parallels to Mail Art and Fluxus as examples of artists who have worked collaboratively long before media technology and the internet allowed it on a larger scale: Richard Colson, *The Fundamentals of Digital Art* (AVA Publishing SA, 2007), 134.

the press release for the aforementioned exhibition *9 Evenings*, which was to become the beginning of *E.A.T.*, we can clearly see the importance of the collaborative aspect: “Maintain a constructive climate for the recognition of the new technology and the arts by a civilized collaboration between groups unrealistically developing in isolation.”³⁸ Naturally, this has consequences as described in the quote above; Thorsson and Bernstrup allow their work to be shared and modified in its entirety by anyone. This is a strategy that is far from claiming the unique position of the original, artistic object, representing a valuable artefact where the limited access contribute to the work’s elevated status. We can find similar examples of media artists who do not share their work only because they can and because it is simple to do so, but because sharing is an integral part of their artistic strategy. These works are only realised when someone activates them and passes them on.

The works of Öyvind Fahlström represent in my view a similar approach to art such as that of Thorsson and Bernstrup. Fahlström’s assumption is that his work can exist in many forms, in many places, and perhaps most importantly, beyond his control. In the end of the quote above, a concrete example of this is given: “according to either his or my choices.” The viewer participates in a way that far exceeds the *artist—artwork—viewer* communication model. The stage is set for a form of collaborative art where the artist becomes the addressee who sets the parameters and where the viewer’s interpretation is primary, without the work losing its connections to its origins or being surpassed to relativism. An explanation of how Fahlström related to this is found in his answer to the question of whether there is a risk that his works’ variable structures could lead to a situation where all combinations are possible, and therefore alike: “Yes, all the combinations by themselves, but [Lyndon] Johnson is always on the cross, Johnson and [Charles] de Gaulle are always without noses and their noses are as large as sailboats next to them.”³⁹ It is within the individual elements of his work that Fahlström exerts his influence, in addition to the rule systems the work presents, whether it is in the form of a variable painting or a board game. And it is in these elements that the selections and refinements of the material resists relativism or a free-for-all approach to his work.

The piece *CIA Monopoly* (1971) (see Figure 2.11) is a relevant example of

38. Billy Klüver, “Press Release - 9 Evenings,” in *the New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (1967; MIT Press, 2003), 222.

39. Fahlström, *Öyvind Fahlström - The Installations*, 48.

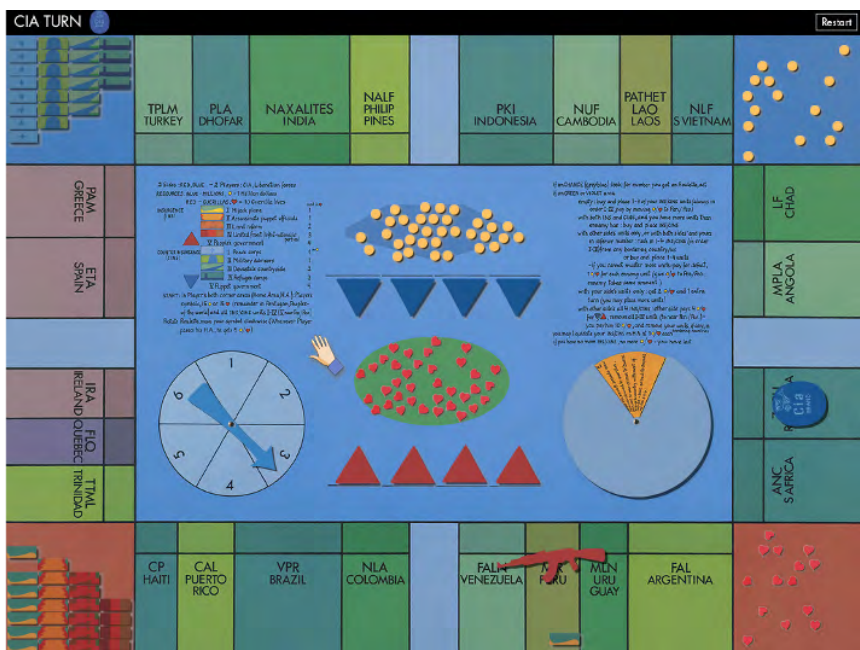


Figure 2.11: CIA Monopoly, Öyvind Fahlström, 1971. This version is a remake as a digital game from 2002.

such a work.⁴⁰ Fahlström made several versions of the Monopoly board game, of which *CIA Monopoly* is only one. The game is built as a battle between red and blue armies, where red represents the freedom fighters and their currency is hearts. The blue army consists of corporations and oppressive authorities such as the CIA, and their currency is money. In general, the rules are similar to Monopoly, but with certain differences that make the game somewhat confusing in terms of gameplay. But most importantly for our discussion about Game Art is the idea behind *CIA Monopoly*: it is meant to be a board game and not a precious artefact. Fahlström's board games became collectibles very quickly, and contrary to his intentions, they became prized art objects of the traditional kind.

A parallel to his board games are his variable paintings, where the intention was to make it possible for the viewer to move around the elements inside the paintings that were attached to the painting by magnets. These paintings also came to be considered too valuable, and consequently became static objects, out of reach for the general public, their element of interactivity denied. However, in 2002, *CIA Monopoly* and some of Fahlström's variable paintings were transformed into digital games, at the initiative of Mattias Nilsson with the help of a group of students. The digital reproductions were shown alongside other works of Fahlström in 2002 at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead. I claim that the underlying intentions and the realisation of Fahlström's works only at this point were fulfilled, by means of the possibilities for distribution and access that digital games provide. But at the same time, these developments serve to exemplify that Game Art is not only driven by technological development, but rather by artistic projections and strategies. The potential for Fahlström's work was perhaps finally realised with the help of digital technology, but the underlying artistic intentions were unchanged. The opportunities for art afforded by the development of media technologies allow collaboration, distribution, complexity, and participation to remain latent as intentions in the artistic practice represented by the works of Öyvind Fahlström.

40. Öyvind Fahlström, *CIA Monopoly*, Variable painting. Acrylic and India ink on magnets and vinyl, 63.5 x 89 cm, 1971.

2.6 Fluxus

Although Öyvind Fahlström was a contemporary of the Fluxus movement from the sixties and onwards, he did not have a direct link to it, but his work nevertheless shared many ideas with the Fluxus movement.⁴¹ This also applies to Fluxus' relationship to games and play. For instance, if we look at the work *CIA Monopoly* by Fahlström, we find clear parallels to Fluxus works. Several Fluxus artists worked with board games, as they were playful, accessible and easy to distribute, all of which are Fluxus traits, according to Celia Pearce:

One of the reasons the Fluxus artists embraced games as an art medium is precisely because of their “commonness.” Games, associated with popular culture, with (by implication, child’s) play, as well as with ease of production and distribution provided a fantastic framework with which to question the preciousness of the art object.⁴²

Commonness, collaborativeness, openness, and playfulness are all characteristics of the Fluxus movement. Play also offered the possibility to challenge the idea of producer and viewer, and present a different, anti-hierarchical relation through real-time participation: “Play was central to Fluxus as a ‘postcognitive’ activity that denied the conventional distinction of producer and receiver and prompted active participation.”⁴³

We find a broader and more direct connection to games through Fluxus' relationship with game rule systems. A typical example can be seen in the multitude of variations of chess made by Fluxus artists, where a game of chess was given new purpose depending on the extent to which its rule system was transformed. Or in George Maciunas' work *The Same Card Deck Flux* (1966-1977), which consists of a deck of cards where all cards are the same (see Figure 2.12), or in *Ping Pong Rackets* (1966-1973), a series of works rackets were modified to make them almost unplayable.⁴⁴ It is possible to find parallels between Fluxus works and Game Art that

41. Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009), 102.

42. Celia Pearce, “Games as Art: The Aesthetics of Play,” Exhibition catalogue, in *Fluxhibition no. 4 - Fluxus Amusements, Diversions, Games, Tricks and Puzzles*, ed. Cecil Touchon (Ontological Museum Publications, 2011), 37.

43. Tim Stott, *Play and Participation in Contemporary Arts Practices*, Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies 12 (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29.

44. Pearce, “Games as Art: The Aesthetics of Play.”

<http://artistsbooksandmultiples.blogspot.se/2013/01/george-maciunas-same-card-flux-deck.html>



Figure 2.12: Same Card Deck Flux, George Maciunas, 1966–1977.

stretch beyond rule-systems, such as in the works of Yoko Ono and Cory Arcangel. The visual similarity between *Pieces of Sky* (2008) and *Super Mario Clouds* (2002) is striking—and they in turn are similar to another Fluxus work by Geoffrey Hendricks called *Sky Laundry (Sheet) #3* (1966–72). All three use the iconographic image of a cloudy sky.

Pieces of Sky by Yoko Ono consists of a small puzzle and the work is sold as individual pieces (see Figure 2.13).⁴⁵ The jigsaw puzzle was exhibited as a part of a bigger installation called *Helmets* (2001–2012), and is also loosely connected to the work *Sky Machine* (1961–1966) where the pieces of sky was handwritten notes instead of puzzle pieces. Cory Arcangel's work *Super Mario Clouds* (2002) is different in that it basically is a modification of the video game *Super Mario Bros*.⁴⁶ Arcangel physically modified the game's ROM circuits to a point where only the sky is left, and everything else from the *Super Mario* game is gone. Only a

45. Yoko Ono, *Pieces of Sky*, Jigsaw puzzle, 2008, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://imaginepeace.com/archives/14468>.

46. Arcangel has released the code for the project on his web page for others to copy his work Cory Arcangel, *Super Mario Clouds*, Modified computer game, 2002; *Super Mario Bros.*, Nintendo, 1985.

<http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-Dio3J-77nAE/TVheUbNajQI/AAAAAAAAABGM/d3NMEs-uk8I/s1600/063.2010.flux4..yoko.ono.pieces.of.sky.jpg>



Figure 2.13: Pieces of Sky, Yoko Ono, this particular version was exhibited 2008. Jigsaw puzzle.

fairly simple animated sky remains, where the clouds move across the screen (see Figure 2.14)

Both *Pieces of Sky* and *Super Mario Clouds* challenge the way we consider them as physical objects. In Ono's case the work consists of puzzle pieces that are separated from each other and may never return to complete their original image, only the promise of a future reunion is left. Even if this work consists of physical objects, its main constitution as a complete image will most probably never be realised. We could say that the work's distribution in itself makes up the work, since in a fragmented form it signifies pieces of the sky, a collective image that everyone shares. As such the work is more about the idea of the image than the image itself.

In Arcangel's work the physicality is somewhat different from *Pieces of Sky*, since this is an example of Game Art where the work itself is a physical object, and also unique.⁴⁷ The piece consists of a modified game console which shows a projected animation on a screen. Perhaps no one, Arcangel included, can modify the game in the same way that he first did. In this way, the work represents a singular and unique object. When I saw the work in 2006 at the Electrohype biennale of media art in Malmö, it struck me how intrinsically sculptural it was, in spite of its somewhat ephemeral output—a video projection of a blue sky with clouds floating by.

This aspect of physicality also has closer bearing to my own work, perhaps above all in *Too Close for Comfort*, which deliberately uses the iconography of old computer games to represent something that for most people is a traumatic experience, the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center (see page 81). When something traumatic is presented in a naïve and stylistic way, it becomes easier to relate to the event, even if the work in itself is non-physical and only indirectly corresponds to the physical event which it represents.

So where lies the parallels between Ono's and Arcangel's works and their relation to physicality? Arcangel's work lives on by being distributed as an animation through the Internet, published on his web page. According to Arcangel, it is probably in the form of the animated gif image that most people now know this work, much more so than the people who have seen his work in person. However, both versions, or modes of representation, share the iconographic content: they both rely on the

47. This piece has a software-based counterpart as well that is not physically unique in the same way as the piece based on the modified cartridge.

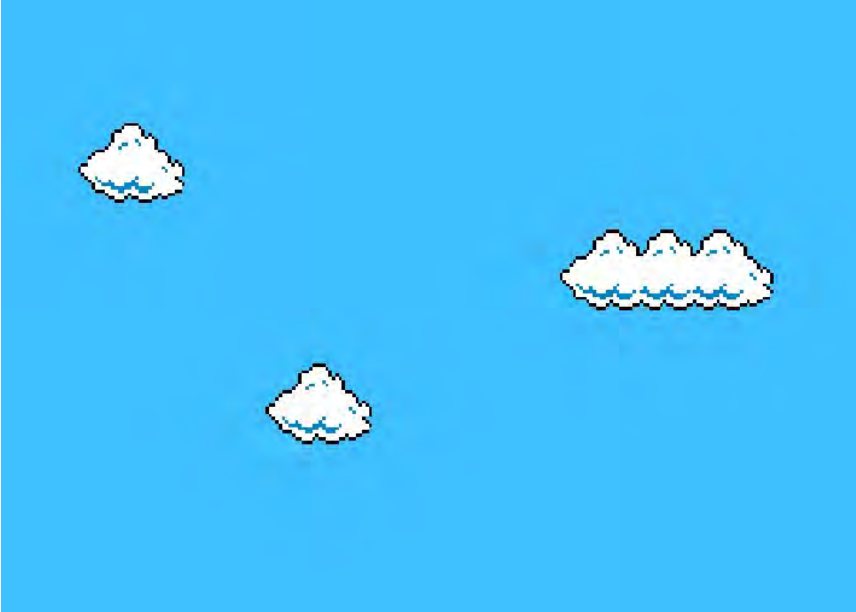


Figure 2.14: Super Mario Clouds, Cory Arcangel, 2002. Film still, modified game console.

iconic image of the sky—which in itself is something we carry with us anyway. It is sufficient for Ono and Arcangel to use it as a peg for our memory, or as a sort of catalyst to fixate their conceptual intentions into something we recognize so well. We could say that they avoid reducing their work to an object, but rather let it pass as a conceptual entity. This argument lies close to Celia Pearce’s description of Fluxus as something without value and preferably disengaged from reification and commodification:

Video game art, like Fluxus art, leverages the reappropriation of mass media and mass-produced commodities, to make statements not only about the media themselves, but also about the larger context of society, power and control in which they are embedded. They tend to be highly self-reflexive, heuristic works that make statements about themselves.⁴⁸

We can at least say that works such as these are quite far from the kind of physicality commonly found in traditional visual art. At the same time

48. Pearce, “Games as Art: The Aesthetics of Play,” 10.

they are quite far from the performance art tradition. They are modest and ephemeral, yet elegant and intelligent, in a way that is perhaps what characterises them as Fluxus art in the first place.

2.7 Rules and Cheating

As much as following rules is essential for our experience of play, the antithesis is disobedience: the possibility of breaking the rules. I would argue that this is a fundamental desire when playing games, and cheating has gone hand in hand with games since the beginning.⁴⁹ This fact is relevant to the present discussion because there are clear parallels between play's relation to rules and the way art relates to its own rules and rule-systems. I would also argue that there is an inclination towards the subversive, the unacceptable and the forbidden in the world of art that have clear connections to rule-breaking and even cheating.

Usually, and because of the near impossible task of removing all programming bugs in a computer game, the player's ability to break rules is not an intentional feature provided by game developers. Such is the case, for instance, with the *hammer jump* in first-person shooter games: when players discovered they could shoot into the ground while jumping at the same time, they used this unintended feature to reach places where they could be safer or have other advantages. This turned out to be a popular trick that gave advantages for those that knew about the glitch, and was included in later games as an intended feature. Another example of exploiting a game's unintended features is wall climbing using mines in the game *Deus Ex* (2000), which allowed the player to circumvent obstacles in the game.⁵⁰ My point here is not that breaking the rules is the first and foremost reason why we play games, but to point out that rule-breaking activities might be an essential part of the game experience, both because it is exciting and because it gives advantages.⁵¹ Cheating also has a subversive element in it, the drive to disobey or to resist subordination. There

49. Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaming Advantages in Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007), 5.

50. Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (The MIT Press, 2005), 76.

51. As Joel Zetterström points out, cheating in multiplayer online games may have other, more serious, implications as well. Financial considerations are related to the player's ability to cheat in online games, which could eventually lead to considerable economic losses. Joel Zetterström, "A Legal Analysis of Cheating in Online Multiplayer Games" (master's thesis, School of Economics and Commercial Law, Göteborg University, 2006), 11.

can be a creative aspect of tweaking the rules or cheating.

A mastery of rules will always imply a process of progression and skill development whose periphery is defined by the limits of the game rules. The rules define the limit of activities that reside within the game. Computer games play a special role in this case since they have bugs that can be exploited. It is a paradox that because of their bugs and glitches, computer games, which are based on discrete algorithms and codes of a seemingly binary character, are unable to or at least are ineffective at presenting the player with absolute and clearly defined behavioural, spatial, or temporal limits. This inevitably results in the player being presented with a moral dilemma: should I cheat or play by the rules? Just because it is possible, the option of cheating will always be there. Espen Aarseth even suggests to add the cheater as a specific player type in addition to those suggested by Richard Bartle: achievers, explorers, socialisers, and killers.⁵² A proper game analysis based on superficial cheating will prevent the analyst to reach a more considered understanding or analysis of the game at hand. As there are a number of ways to cheat in computer games, we could also add the perspective given by Roger Caillois: the cheater as someone who still relies on the game to continue, and the state of play to be intact. The cheater's intentions are never to break the spell of play, but to excel within it by breaking the rules. In that sense, this is a type of cheating that maintains the 'magic circle' of play, a term formulated by Johan Huizinga and later used in game studies, to signify the borders between the game and the real world. This is a term we will discuss later (see page 116 and onward). When cheaters maintain the 'magic circle' of the game, they are different from spoil-sports, who attempt to shatter the game world by intervening against the rules and hence breaking the agreed upon boundaries of the game space.⁵³ It is completely counter-productive for a cheater to do this, in fact the more effective the cheater can operate within the game world, the better.

If we connect the notion of cheating to Game Art and artistic practice in general, the matter becomes even more interesting, as it connects us

52. Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," in *MelbourneDAC Conference Proceedings* (MelbourneDAC, the 5th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference, 2003); Richard Bartle, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs," *MUSE - Multi-user Entertainment Ltd*, 1996, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm>.

53. Johan Huizinga, "Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon," in *The Game Design Reader: a Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (1938; MIT Press, 2006), 106.

to activities that provides links between play and art. American artist and game theorist Mary Flanagan has pointed out the intriguing relation between cheating and subversion in her book “Critical Play:”

Because they [games] primarily exist as rule systems, games are particularly ripe for subversive practices. A hallmark of games is that they are structured by their rule sets, and every game has its “cheats”—even play itself, pushing at the boundaries of a game system, could be said to involve a kind of subversion.⁵⁴

The ability for games to mimic subversive practices makes them excellent tools for artists with critical attitudes toward rules, subordination, misuse of power, and conformism. In this respect, Game Art is a form of art that can link these ideas together. Game Art and Fluxus are conceptually linked by the way they both relate to rule systems. Naturally, rule systems necessarily bring with them a certain conformity. In the world of games, the rules are usually agreed upon and commonly known to all participants for the game to make sense. In this way the rules could be seen to represent conformism. So when a work of Game Art and Fluxus deliberately appropriates game rules, we can also question its relation to the conformity that the rules represents. The result is subversive: take for example Yoko Ono’s work *Play it By Trust* (1966) (see figure 2.15) where we see an example of how a game like chess and its stringent rules are turned upside down.⁵⁵ *Play it By Trust* consists of a chessboard where there are only white pieces and squares on the board. In a game which perhaps to most people represents a metaphor of war between two parties, it is no longer possible to distinguish between friend or foe—this even though the structured rules of chess themselves have not changed, in terms of how pieces move on the board, how to win, and so on. The subversiveness lies in that all pieces are the same, a parallel to modern warfare where increasingly complex conflicts make it even more difficult to distinguish battle lines, with no clear fronts or demarcations. In this respect, *Play it By Trust* has parallels to Fahlström’s work *CIA Monopoly*, which takes the metaphorical struggle of the Monopoly game—capitalist growth at the expense of others—and turns the conflict into a symbolic struggle between ideologies by changing the rule system.

54. Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 11.

55. Yoko Ono, *Play it By Trust*, Sculpture made by chess set, 1997; Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 112.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/yokoonoofficial/2892798380>

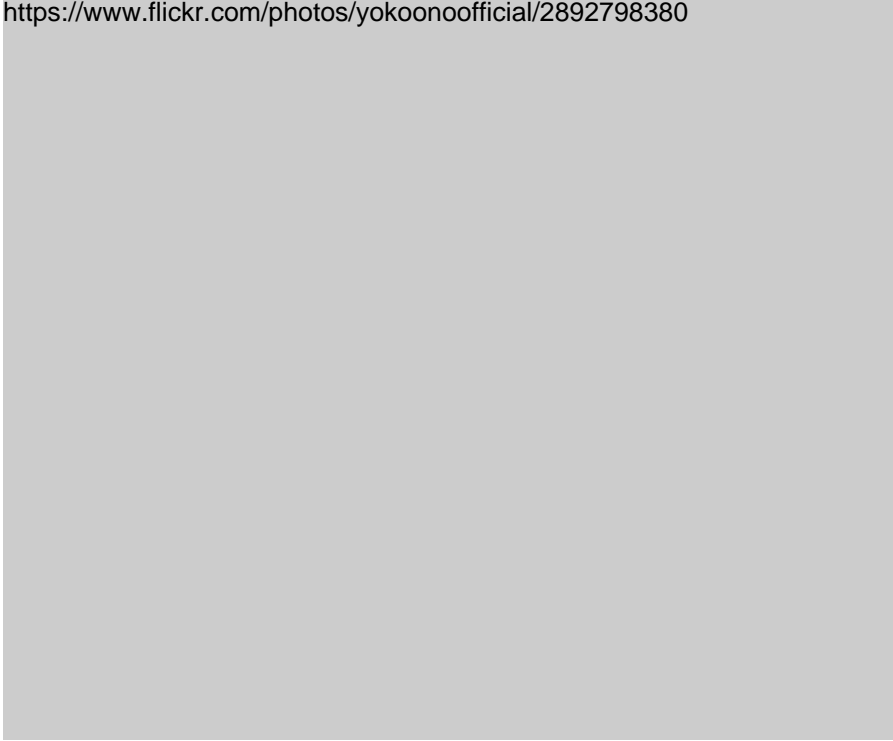


Figure 2.15: Play it by Trust, Yoko Ono, 1966. *White chess set.*

The aim for this chapter has been to provide a conceptual framework for Game Art, firstly through an attempt to define Game Art, and secondly by discussing examples taken from art history and contemporary art that have been relevant to understanding how Game Art relates to space, viewer participation, and rule systems. I began by suggesting a definition of Game Art, based on comparisons between earlier definitions, elaborating on three perspectives in particular: Firstly, a parallel between installation art and Game Art regarding how the viewer experiences the work; secondly, the spatiality of Game Art; and last, the way Game Art exploits the rule systems of games, and how the viewer is in turn presented with the choice to act subversively to the rules implied within a playable work of art.

The examples that I have put forward in this chapter provide cases where art inherits rule systems, aesthetics, or in other ways relate to games. In many ways, the inquiry in this chapter represents the result of questions that I kept returning to in my early phases of making Game Art—the rule-systems of games, and the tremendous ability that computers have to enforce and maintain them, makes them perfect for ludic activities. Add to that the development of 3D rendering and the myriad of innovations that follow the game industry and we have a technology that is made for art. The intention of this chapter was to show that artistic practices can use computer games in particular, and games in general, as means for artistic appropriation.⁵⁶ Later on, we will expand the scope a bit by adding the notion of play to the discussion. As we now have introduced Game Art as the field of study, we will now turn to the discussion of the methodological framework of artistic research in general and how it informs the inquiry that is undertaken in this work.

56. Mathias Jansson, *Everything I Shoot Is Art* (Brescia: LINK Editions, 2012), 38–59.

3 The Question of Artistic Research and Methodology

Art is no longer only art. Its methods are recapitulated, ooze out and become feral in combination with other forms of life. Art methodologies convey art's capacities to enact a live process in the world, launching sensorial particles and other conjunctions in ways and combinations that renew their powers of disturbance and vision. Art methodologies are a range of ways of sensing, doing and knowing generated in art that are now circulating more haphazardly, perhaps less systematically, and requiring of a renewed form of understanding in order to trace and develop them.¹

Matthew Fuller

The purpose of this chapter is to give an introduction to central methodological considerations for artistic research as a discipline in general, within the framework of the work documented in this thesis. I discuss key thoughts on the methodology of artistic research and evaluate them from the perspective of a practice-based research project on Game Art. I aim to discuss the relationship between the artistic and thesis work, and how the practical and theoretical components in my project relate to each other. From the discussion on the relationship between theory and practice, science and art, and reflection and action, I suggest a pragmatic methodology which relates to the specific context of artworks made as artistic research, and that this context determines the outcome of the research. As a consequence, my focus has shifted from a methodology based on the researching artists' subjective investigation of the subject matter—that is, their artworks—and instead to the knowledge produced when the artist researcher connects the premises for the work's conception and realisation to general categories or conceptual analysis within the field, in this case Game Art.

1. Matthew Fuller, "Art Methodologies in Media Ecology," in *Deleuze, Guattari, and the Production of the New*, ed. Simon O'Sullivan and Stephen Zepke (London: Continuum, 2008).

3 The Question of Artistic Research and Methodology

The planning and realisation of the artworks included in the thesis become an exploration and mapping of Game Art in particular, and how art relates to play and games in general. This has in turn informed the theoretical discussions on the relation between art and rule systems, art that aims to maintain a state of play, and the role of attention and state of flow, among other topics. Through philosophical analysis, I discuss issues that have been raised as a result of the artistic process. This pertains to issues that specifically relate to Game Art, such as rule systems and cheating, the spatiality of the game space, the state of play and how, if at all, a state of play could be maintained in a work of art.

Artistic research is still a relatively young research field, and is still in a formative phase. It is not difficult to find critical voices both from inside and outside of the field.² For instance, professor of philosophy of science Gerard de Vries makes the following comment in the book *Artistic Research*, under the title “Beware of Research”:

So, I am a bit sceptical about talking about artistic production as a form of research. In my view, a similarity between the sciences and visual art would involve a different kind of circulation of artworks. In fact, one has to change the practice of the artist in order to get that similarity. Last but not least, I am not entirely sure what the urge is to classify artistic work as research.³

There are several reasons for de Vries’ scepticism. Why does art practice need to be classified as research? The answers are not evident; they require us not only to look at the relation between art and research but also the relation between theory and practice, art and science, and the changing role of art in society. In addition, we are dealing with two very diverse practices in and of themselves, ‘art’ and ‘research,’ which makes comparisons and juxtapositions difficult. It is easy to find similarities and differences between them, depending on which varieties you choose to compare, but it is hard to draw conclusions and make generalisations

2. An aspect that is only briefly treated in this text are the institutional and political aspects of artistic research within the arts, where European educational reforms and an increasing academisation of fine art educations play a central role. These are not irrelevant but I have chosen to limit the scope of this text to questions that more directly relate to the individual research project and its immediate research discourse.

3. Gerard de Vries, “Beware of Research,” ed. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager, *Artistic Research, Lier en boog* (Amsterdam), 18 (2004): 18.

based on them. Not all art is research, and neither does it intend to be. The aim in this section is to discuss the necessary conditions for how at least certain forms of artistic practice can be research.

Artistic research is still relatively new, and there is a need to discuss methodological problems that concerns its mode of operation.⁴ The research community is still busy dealing with the issues raised by de Vries and others. The underlying methodological framework is not sufficiently developed to be finely tuned—the basic foundation itself is in formation. In spite of this, and perhaps due to the significant efforts spent on discussing what artistic research could and should be, it is now at least possible to get an impression of what this foundation looks like.⁵

There are other reasons for the scepticism toward this particular type of artistic research, which first and foremost concern fundamental questions and as such is all the more important: *is it possible, useful, and therefore important for artists to be able to obtain a doctorate in the arts?* De Vries touches on this in his quote above, as his scepticism rests on the presupposition that the art, in one way or another, will concede in the meeting with a research practice.

Whether artistic research is a useful practice or not is first and foremost based on the attitude we have regarding the relationship between art and, for the lack of a better word, ‘scientificness.’⁶ It is after all from science and the humanities that research traditions have been developed and refined over centuries, and which is the context doctorates within the arts need to relate to.⁷ It is hence the world of art that gravitates towards academia and it is the art world that has to prepare for what

4. Henrik Karlsson, *Handslag, famntag, klapp eller kyss?: konstnärlig forskarutbildning i Sverige*, SISTER 4 (Stockholm: Swedish Institute for Studies in Education / Research (SISTER), 2002), 55–60.

5. A number of conferences and books have been published on this matter in recent years. Perhaps the most notable conference on artistic research in the Nordic countries is *Sensuous Knowledge*, an annual conference arranged since 2004 by Bergen National Academy of the Arts. The Swedish Research Council also arranges symposia and issues a yearbook on artistic research.

6. The scope of this text is not to discuss the differences between the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. When I refer to ‘science’ in this context, I am concerned with the scientific methodologies of research in general, and not only the natural sciences.

7. For this particular argument my focus lies on the pursuit of PhD degrees within the arts, rather than the concept of art being research in itself. However, this is not necessarily an obvious distinction, which I discuss briefly from page 63.

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this entails.⁸ Whether artistic research will develop considerably different research methodologies, it will anyway be compared against more prevalent forms of research in other knowledge fields. The process might become reductive in the sense that it simplifies both art and science beyond recognition through channelling, as well as presenting art and science as opposites. That does not necessarily reflect a fair view of the matter, since art, science, and technology are frequently connected in a seemingly unrestrained manner by those who see the benefit in thinking of them principally as one and the same.⁹ My point here is that as soon as artistic practice becomes artistic research, differences come to the front, solidified by articulation and critique. Suspicions about improper conduct arise from both sides for ideological reasons—a process where the role of art runs the risk of being downgraded and the research runs the risk of becoming invalid. Part of the explanation for this channelling might lie in Hal Foster's used-car principle, from his book *The return of the real: the Avant-garde at the end of the century*:

Incidentally, these exchanges seem governed by a used-car principle of discourse: when one discipline wears out a paradigm ("text" in literary criticism, "culture" in anthropology), it trades it in, passes it on.¹⁰

Foster argues that in meeting of other fields of knowledge, we tend to inherit their previous frameworks and paradigms. Our perception of what it is *they do* on 'the other side' is based on what *they did* and we are left with an antagonistic and outdated view of that which is unfamiliar to us: artistic practice as intuitive, and irrational, academic research as logical, rational, and hypothesis-driven. One, in my opinion, far more fruitful approach for the troublesome polarity between art and research is suggested by Swedish philosopher Per Nilsson in his book *The Amphibian Stand*. He promotes a view on artistic research which is neither

8. This is not a unique phenomenon, but one of many examples of the academisation of art, see: Thierry de Duve, "When Form Has Become Attitude—And Beyond," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 20.

9. One example within my own subject area is the journal *Leonardo*, a Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology and an organisation that fosters collaboration across disciplines.

10. Hal Foster, *The return of the real: the Avant-garde at the end of the century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 182.

a conglomerate nor a synthesis, but rather an establishment of a research-based field of knowledge. He takes from his outset the intersection between the individual and the universal:

One suggestion as regards how we can view art as based on research, without claiming that this is the essence of art, is to see it as one part in a dialectic between the particular and the universal, between the abstract and the concrete. A concrete work can be viewed as a subjective critical standpoint against objective subject-less oppression. Art, through its visualisation, can start a deconstruction of the abstract or general. But art is in no position to falsify the general. However, art does focus on the weaknesses inherent in the general when concretely applied.¹¹

Through individual expression, an artistic object is transformed into a work of art the moment the object meets its discourse.¹² This argument relies on the artwork's ability to enter into a discourse—the artistic expression that results in an artwork can either be a form of criticism or what Nilsson refers to as a parole, “individual innovations of speech.”¹³ In both cases, a dialogue occurs between the meeting of the work and its discourse with its potential to transform that same discourse. In other words, this is Nilsson's way of explaining how art is social. His further arguments are relevant for the conception of art as research-based, and in turn rely on art's ability to constitute a form of research-based knowledge, albeit not scientific.

The thesis I am proposing is that we can regard art as a form of knowledge separate from science, a form of knowledge in its own right. Moreover, I am interested in the question of whether we can regard such artistic knowledge as research based or not. If this is the case, then artistic research rests on non-scientific foundations. If art is a form of knowledge in its own right, and if art is research based, then research in art rests on artistic rather than scientific foundations. Hence,

11. Per Nilsson, *The Amphibian Stand - A Philosophical Essay Concerning Research Processes in Fine Art* (h:ström, 2009), 22.

12. Ibid., 99.

13. Ibid., 96.

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we will be dealing with artistic research as a way of acquiring knowledge.¹⁴

According to Nilsson, we have an artistic field of knowledge that rests on its own ground, and not on scientific grounds. The question is whether the non-scientific basis for artistic research that Nilsson refers to is essentially different from science, or is actually still an expression of the distinction that characterizes the diversification of fields of knowledge within scientific research in general—as in, for example, the difference between philosophical and mathematical research. My approach is the latter: I argue that the way artistic research is undertaken is not of such an exotic fashion that it breaks with the way science and the humanities convey knowledge. Given the multitudes of ways scientific research is carried out, it is more than capable of taking in most of the practices we recognise as research. Artistic research represents a shift of artistic practices, a shift that in certain cases is significant and in other cases only of academic nature. This in turn depends on the person doing research and their choice of artistic strategy. This shift consists primarily of the discourse mentioned above by Nilsson, and furthermore through the formation of a methodology that can support this discourse. As Nilsson points out, the discourse is central to art's ability to convey knowledge, but it is also crucial for artistic research to be *useful*: if we accept Nilsson's terms for art as a carrier of knowledge, we can extend the argument and assert that *artistic research, together with its values and results, is based on the extent to which the research partakes in its rightful discourse, be it whether it is critical or a parole*.

This approach allows for several interesting perspectives, which Nilsson also touches upon when he, with the support of Paul Feyerabend, suggests "methodological anarchism" and "open exchange," a pragmatic methodology which is not established in advance, and which allows for a wider scale of impressions and influences.¹⁵ Embedded in such a methodology is both freedom and responsibility. For my own part, "methodological anarchism" is nothing less than a requirement for artistic research, but it does not mean that we are dealing with a similar form of freedom and relativism that, confusingly enough, is what artistic practice tries to achieve. The discursive critique which, according to Nilsson, gives art its role as carrier of knowledge can only to a lesser degree be applied for

14. Nilsson, *The Amphibian Stand*, 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 149.

artistic research, in my opinion. This claim is based on my view of what art can be, or rather, what it is not. At least for my own choice of method in this work, it has been important in the context of artistic research that my works of art are accompanied by reflection, in this case through the writing of this text. My claims are informed by the art making process and vice versa. We will return to this question when we discuss James Elkins' three models of research, and more specifically the model where the art simply is the research (see page 63).

It is also worth reflecting on whether it is possible for the results of artistic research to be supported on their own terms. The core of this problem lies in the performative element: how can an artistic practice prosper within a research practice? The polarities are defined by taking a perspective based on the degree of art's influence: either all artistic activity is a form of research and the extraction of a particular part of that artistic activity—artistic research—becomes rather meaningless if we disregard art's status as an academic discipline.¹⁶ Or, artistic practice is separated from artistic research to such an extent that the artistic contribution loses its potency, and as such is transformed into an illustration or a commentary façade to support the conceptual analysis of the written text. The aim should be to let the work and the text form a dialogue, where they both rest on their own terms, and where the context of the work of art maintains the social function of the work. This paradox between staying inside the context of research or outside in the context of art, relies on the somewhat complex relationship between art and its objects of inquiry. If we take as an outset Theodor W. Adorno's view of art, where art's relation to its object of study relies on negation but is able to convey rather its own empirical, non-deterministic experience, it is clear that a continuation of the argument in favour of artistic research and its usefulness should be even more complicated:

Yet it is precisely as artifacts, as products of social labor, that they [works of art] also communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and from which they draw their content [Inhalt]. Art negates the categorical determinations

16. As an example, the long existing competence development programmes within art schools have frequently been equated with research, which in a formal perspective constitutes a kind of validation of artistic practice as research through competence development. See: Vetenskapsrådet, *Kontext - Kvalitet - Kontinuitet*, ed. Henrik Karlsson et al. (Vetenskapsrådet, 2007), 46.

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stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance.¹⁷

If we imagine a form of artistic research where the premises are based on developing a form of meta-level for the artistic practice it derives from, with elements of reflection, dialogue, and conceptual elaboration, we create double layers of meta-levels, where artistic research and its relationship to its objects of inquiry is affected; in the worst case it is obscured by art's unwillingness to declare the nature of the relationship with its own matter of study, its empirical data if you will. Questions such as "How can artistic research be useful when its starting point is to grasp something that is in itself ungraspable?" is relevant in this context and deserves attention. To follow up the quotation from Adorno, we should be able to rephrase this question: is it in the interest of artistic research to keep art indeterministic by keeping artistic research indeterministic?

In other words, artistic research represents a form of pseudo-assimilation of art into society, which in our context means a research discourse where art takes part in social conditions without getting affected. It becomes legitimate. We could call this strategy successful in the sense that art's social function here is to quote, simulate, represent, and criticise the surroundings without *being* the same. Art's role in this context is partly based on art's inability to take part, but also on its ability to detach and break away. Although this approach can be said to represent an archaic modernism with its origins in the differentiation of art and philosophical aesthetics, there are reasons to argue that contemporary art still has a tendency to avoid direct criticism, both on political and moral grounds.

It is easy to see why artistic researchers want to be inside and outside at the same time—to benefit from the academic context without having to take the social responsibility that this entails. This is not an argument for claiming a form of relativism or artistic freedom for the methodological choices that are made, or that the latent relativism that lies in the argument will relieve artistic research from any kind of criticism or need for transparency. On the contrary, it is precisely in such a situation that a sharp and clear relation to the role of research is required. In the same way as it is problematic for artists to claim *moral immunity* when art and society's interests collide, it is not justified to claim *academic im-*

17. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. from the German by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970; London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 5.

munity when artistic research is criticized.¹⁸ Instead, roles and premises must be made clear, and the rules need to be defined even for the form of artistic research which attempts to implode science from within. Artistic research does not have the same relation to research as art has to society, and this is an important difference between art and artistic research. The approach that I have chosen for this project is pragmatic in the sense that I am only including the works of art that has been vetted and exhibited within the institutions of art that has been available through the usual procedure of applying for exhibitions, curated group shows and other channels. Even if my work in many ways illustrate specific ways to incorporate games and art, and they can be seen as proofs of concept or experiments if you like, they are all shown and exposed to an art public through the context of the group show or the separate exhibition.

3.1 The Artist as Researcher

The links between artistic research and art history, art theory, and art pedagogy, or in general terms ‘research on art,’ are clear in cases where research results are presented in the form of a thesis like this one. Traditions from humanities research are incorporated into artistic research through their various forms and strategies, together with the traditions of academic writing. In addition, researchers within the arts inherit methodological frameworks from fields of knowledge that are close to the artist’s practice without having to compromise on the part of artistic research. The flux of knowledge between the new and the old is not a new phenomenon, it is rather a typical occurrence for young sciences to borrow from others in order to gain scientific credibility. Sociologist Donald Broady refers to Pierre Bourdieu in the following about this tendency:

Bourdieu has on a few occasions noted the socially explainable but scientifically dubious phenomena that younger and

18. Lars Vilks, “Del 1081: Konstnärforskningen och MU10,” 2010, Swedish artist and art theorist Lars Vilks’ views on artistic research might serve as an example of this. According to Vilks, since art can never be research without simultaneously ceasing to be art, what remains is an institutional critique that is not necessarily in harmony with neither art nor research. In this way, the artist gets free hands and can engage in pseudo-research where fundamental methodological assumptions such as the idea of truthfulness and reference traditions can be ignored. Accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.vilks.net/2010/10/23/del-1081-konstnarforskningen-och-mu10/>.

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socially lower ranked disciplines lend attributes from more developed and respected sciences, to simulate scientificness.¹⁹

Bourdieu emphasises the importance of not having sociology, as a young and undeveloped field of science, “fall to its knees to other sciences.”²⁰ The “doubly subordinate position” of the social sciences, pressured from the two different hierarchies of the arts and the natural sciences, undoubtedly has its parallels to artistic research as well.²¹ According to Bourdieu, such disciplines create an avant-gardism in itself, with the power to dominate and offer criticism to the already existing hierarchies they relate to:

What one might call the *scientific syndrome* ...can be understood as an attempt by disciplines defined as doubly negative (neither arts nor science) to reverse the situation by inverting the signs, and to aggregate the prestige and profits of literary (or philosophical) avant-gardism with those of scientific avant-gardism, although these had long been considered incompatible, through the miraculous conjunction of the appearance of the scientific rigour with the appearance of literary elegance or philosophical profundity. We can understand how the circular structure of domination, which allows disciplines that are doubly subordinate according to traditional criteria simultaneously to dominate from another angle the disciplines that dominate them, only if we realize

19. My translation from Swedish: “Bourdieu har i några sammanhang pekat på det socialt förklarliga men vetenskapligt skadliga fenomenet att yngre och socialt lågt rankade discipliner lånar attribut från mer framskridna och respekterade vetenskaper, för att simulera vetenskaplighet.” Donald Broady, *Sociologi och epistemologi* (HLS Förlag, Stockholm, 1991), 43.

20. My translation from Swedish: “knäfalla för andra vetenskaper.” Ibid.

21. It was not very long ago, at least when compared to the age of the university system, that the engineering sciences had to work hard for the right to give their own doctoral degrees. After a long process, starting at the turn of the last century, the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm received permission to issue doctoral degrees in 1927. They would only receive specific funding for their research a decade later. It is also interesting that a similar discussion took place then, too: engineering research was considered to be a lesser form of research, whose nature was considered too ‘applied.’ The question remains if this attitude is valid also for artistic research, but then presumably for different reasons than for it being too applicable. Henrik Björck, “Förutsättningar för svensk forskningspolitik,” *Forskningspolitik*, no. 1 (2005).

that it characterizes a critical moment of the historical process which tends to subordinate the citadel of literary culture to scientific culture, which used to be subordinate.²²

No matter how much artistic research appropriates from other scientific disciplines, there is a difference in relation to which purposes these fulfil when applied to artistic research that is determined by the research subject. It is this difference that is worth keeping: in my own case, it is in the role of an artist within the artistic field of knowledge that I carry out the research, and derived research traditions should be considered to be transposed onto the arts' field of knowledge.

For instance, when I discussed Game Art in chapter 2, I do it primarily under the role of an artist, and not as a game researcher as such. This also applies to my discussion on play and art in relation to philosophy. Seen from a philosophical and game research perspective, I run the risk of creating a discrepancy between the role I claim to have and the one I really have. I have in this way a sort of alternative agenda, albeit not hidden, to deal with philosophical aesthetics and game research. I, the researcher, necessarily borrow from other fields of knowledge so I can get a broader and more considered understanding of things that relate to the making of art. The relationship is probably rather suspect in the sense that it is more about *overtaking* and *consuming* rather than *improving* and *lifting*. Or in Olli Tapio Leino's terms, when he discusses the role of the game researcher:

...a significant difference emerges as soon as one thinks beyond the practical level, for example about the role of 'subjective' impressions in research: while the game scholar has to keep his/her subjectivity at bay to retain clear picture of the object under scrutiny, the phenomenologist takes the subjective experience as the premise and begins with what is given in the experience.²³

I can relate to the phenomenologist approach described here, which Leino explains in detail in his thesis. My choice of method is skewed from the very start through the subjective relation artists have to their

22. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), 121–122.

23. Olli Tapio Leino, "Emotions in Play: On the Constitution of Emotion in Solitary Computer Game Play" (PhD diss., IT University of Copenhagen, 2010), 57.

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materials and their objects of study. If I have a subjective relation to computer games because of the way I use them for my own purposes, then other rules apply when we turn to the role of my work as potential objects of inquiry. I consider, and this thesis aims to reflect, that the questions raised and answered by the researcher should not directly stem from the artworks produced by the same researcher by way of work-internal analysis or self-reflection: neither the practical nor the theoretical part of the PhD should be the object of inquiry for the other. They should instead supply and support each other through a dialogic relationship.

This approach has had a profound impact on my method, as it has shifted the discussion in this text away from work-internal aspects to extra-aesthetic discussions instead. In short, the inquiry is more about 'how' the works are constituted than 'what' the work is about. Surely, this is not binary in the sense that it supports the claim that form and content are disconnected, but it is a position that has influenced the selection of topics in this text: the focus lies on constitutive aspects such as the ludic components of art, rule systems in games, cheating and subversive behaviour, and so on. This has in turn led to the coming discussions regarding play and art in artworks that aim to maintain a state of play, as well as the discussion of rule systems and how they are used in my and others' work. In other words, the object of study is context and procedure rather than content. Artistic research has a rather complex relation to the subject matter, or object of study. Several suggested strategies are fully or partially based on self-reflection, as exemplified by Per Nilsson's words:

I will argue that art is a form of knowledge that is radically hermeneutical and that gives shape, form and meaning to human conduct and experience. ...This means that one thing that separates art from science is art's lack of given empirical subjects to investigate. Artists have first to create, or choose in a radical way, the object of their investigation. This means that art does not enter the sphere of science since it is creative rather than investigative.²⁴

In this way, Nilsson suggests a strategy where artists create their own object of investigation, which in turn leads to a situation of self-reflection. It is my firm belief that strategies for artistic research that rely heavily

24. Nilsson, *The Amphibian Stand*, 19.

on the study of the artist's own artworks are problematic. My argument is not a critique of self-reflection in research as such—on the contrary, research without a present and visible subject risks becoming too objectified, as if the subject is not there at all. Neither do I criticise that the artist can go too far in their description of their work's intentions and motives, as this does nothing more than illuminate and enrich the corresponding artistic process. My criticism is rather primarily based on the presumed impossibility of artistic work to form the basis of an investigation when the work is detached from its discourse. As previously mentioned, it is not artists who provide their work's discourse, nor are they capable of giving an exhaustive explanation of how their work relates to a discourse that is not yet formed. The high degree of reflection found in artistic research is emphasised as essential, as exemplified by the following quote from Henk Borgdorff:

Art (and not just conceptual art) is highly reflexive, even though pre-reflective (tacit) aspects also figure in its production and reception. This reflexivity of art, in conjunction with the reflexive stance of the artist, is one of the most important rationales for research in the arts. ...Through artistic research, artists create scope for fundamental reflection—a free space to think—in and through their practice of creating and performing.²⁵

Although reflection rightly enough is essential for artistic research, it can hardly be said to be a unique characteristic of artistic research alone. Borgdorff probably does not intend to make an exclusionary argument here, but I have doubt toward the idea for researching artists to have a “free place to think.” Rather, it is precisely because research is *not* a free place to think that makes it interesting. This ‘unfree’ place contains the research methodology, and as such is an important and defining component for the work, regardless of the methodological conditions: there may be a “methodological anarchy” in Paul Feyerabend's case, or “methodological pluralism” in Borgdorff's case, but a methodology nevertheless.²⁶

25. Henk Borgdorff, “Where Are We Today? The State of the Art in Artistic Research,” in *Forskning och kritik - granskning och recension av konstnärlig forskning*, ed. Torbjörn Lind (Vetenskapsrådet, 2010), 24.

26. *Ibid.*, 29.

3.2 Models of Artistic Research

We now have the opportunity to focus on artistic research and its relation to reflexivity. In the following discuss some models for artistic research that have been proposed and implemented by others, thereby linking my previous discussion on methodology to specific strategies. There are a number of accounts of various forms of artistic research; we will look at the models outlined by James Elkins and Christopher Frayling's model, through the account of Henrik Karlsson. James Elkins describes three models for artistic research in the book "Printed Project."²⁷ In his first model, "The Dissertation is research that informs the art practice," he mentions a subcategory where the thesis consists of philosophy or art theory.²⁸ This solution, however, has its problems, according to Elkins:

...even though the PhD student might believe her practice is supported by her philosophic inquiry, the relation might appear very differently to her viewers, critics, and (eventually) her historians. Often artists' theories turn out to be irrelevant to what comes to be taken as most important about the work. And as studio-art instructors know, students who construct elaborate theories about their work sometimes use theory not for its content as much as its rhetorical force: the philosophy or theory of art serve as a smokescreen, hiding what is actually of interest in the work.²⁹

Elkins' reservations, to which I agree, are based on the assumption that the thesis plays a supplemental role, which somehow aims to give weight and credibility to the artworks—but which ultimately becomes the most important, at least if we consider the project as a whole. Such additional theoretical effort runs the risk of doing the opposite of what it intended. But this risk is only real if we assume that the text is supplemental for the works. When the work's object of study, or even the artist's own self-reflection, provides the basis for conceptual analysis the text is reduced

27. James Elkins, "The Three Configurations of Practice-Based PhDs," in *Printed Project - The New PhD in Studio Art*, ed. James Elkins (The Sculptors' Society of Ireland, 2005).

28. Elkins also gives a good description of the different regional solutions and configurations of artistic research in this article: James Elkins, "Six Cultures of the PhD," in *Share: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, ed. Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELLA, 2013).

29. Elkins, "Printed Project," 10.

to either a defence, or in Elkins' words, a "smokescreen" for the practical part of the project.

In Elkins' second model, "the dissertation is equal to the artwork," there is a balance between the *written* and the *made*. There are opportunities for the thesis and the work to come together and form an interdisciplinary whole. Alternatively, one may envisage an opposite situation, where the different parts are not melted together as a whole but rather contrasted against each other on equal terms. The problem with this model is, according to Elkins, that artistic practice risks being equated with scientific disciplines to which it cannot be compared. There is an essential difference between mixing different disciplines in science, and to do the same in a conglomerate where artistic practice is involved:

It is superficial, I think, to imagine that art practice can just be added to an eclectic selection of disciplines composed by the candidate. There are academic pursuits that result from combinations such as anthropology + sociology + linguistics, or art history + archaeology + semiotics, but there is no academic practice that combines creative work with any other discipline.³⁰

The basis for this criticism is that the artistic element always will weigh stronger than the other parts, which means that the conglomeration of art and other disciplines breaks apart, as there is not a common and equal ground for all involved parties. Although I agree to a certain point with Elkins in that the artistic element has a special position, there is in my opinion no particular reason why the artistic element of a conglomerate of several scientific disciplines cannot coexist without dominating the other parts. It depends primarily on the researcher's expertise and artistic practice. If the hurdle is based on an artistic view that rests on the notion of art's freedom and autonomy, then the following quote from Per Nilsson could form the basis for my criticism:

I will argue that we now have reached a time of post-aesthetics where other claims to validity than strictly aesthetic ones demand our attention. Art, therefore, is not autonomous but comes from, comments upon, and takes part in life in all its multivalency.³¹

30. Ibid., 15.

31. Nilsson, *The Amphibian Stand*, 18.

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Art and its accompanying practices, and to about the same extent its tradition and history, are different from scientific disciplines, but at the same time the differences are not significant enough to suggest that relevant syntheses between them cannot occur in a research discourse, in line with Nilsson's quote above. Elkins' criticism is based on the view that artistic practice in itself cannot be 'added' to other disciplines for the reason that such a discipline does not exist: there is nothing to add. However, as Nilsson suggests, artistic research of this kind has the potential to form a new academic discipline instead, a kind of third field, in which a conglomerate of disciplines are included. This is the approach that I have chosen for my own work: *the theoretical and practical parts should form a dialogue of equal parts, where they enrich each other through a symbiotic relationship*. In this approach I attempt to maintain equal relationships between the artistic and the theoretical work. The one is not complete without the other. In addition, the theoretical part does not claim to uphold or in itself be a work of art. Or, as Mike Bode and Staffan Schmidt put it in their dissertation "Off the Grid":

As we make use of both visual and textual tools and also use images as situated concepts, as artistic researchers we must avoid alienating the visual art context, and simultaneously respect the transgressive character of creativity by not bringing one under the rule of the other.³²

Embedded in Bode and Schmidt's argument lies an expanded view on what is knowledge, or rather which different forms knowledge can have. My own approach is similar to theirs: as a method I attempt to develop some of the reflections I have made during the planning and development of my own work, in order to obtain a dialogue between the reflection and the practice. A *leakage* has occurred between the two that I consider fruitful and relevant. There is no doubt that the theoretical work which the thesis represents has provided significant input for my artistic work, and the other way around. I go to both the works and the discussion in the text for answer to my questions. But my works of art are not the object of study in itself. *The object of study is rather the conditions from which they have come to be, with all which that entails*. This is crucial to understanding the method that this thesis is based on.

32. Mike Bode and Staffan Schmidt, "Off the Grid" (PhD diss., Valand School of Fine Arts, University of Gothenburg, 2008), 29.

A number of artists and theorists use a similar strategy to the one described by Schmidt and Bode above, and suggest models that put theory and practice at the same level of importance, or alternatively as a new synthesis altogether. A theorist who has formulated the relationship between art and theory in a way that I can relate to the most, and in my opinion supports a dialogical relationship between art and theory, is the Greek cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis. In the book *Spatial Aesthetics* he suggests a relationship between art and theory that is closer to the artistic practices that characterize the ‘expanded field’ of contemporary art, which allows for equal roles between the art critic and artist, an “expanded field that requires a new cross-disciplinary mode of analysis.”³³ His starting point is his role as a writer and what relationship he and his texts have to artists and thereby their artworks. Papastergiadis proposes an alternative methodology that takes in the development of art and theory. Art’s movement toward popular culture and multidisciplinary imposes new requirements for art theory, just as developments in critical theory, feminism, and postcolonial theory require a far more extensive involvement from the art theorist: “The task of the writer is not only to reflect on art, but also see how a representation is both transformative and constitutive of subjectivity.”³⁴ The result is a model where art criticism gets a far more participatory role than before, but what is particularly interesting to us is how such a relationship allows a model for the *reflected* and the *made* in relation to artistic research.

In contrast, there are models of artistic research where practice plays a far greater role than reflection. If we return to James Elkins and look at his third model, *The dissertation is the artwork, and vice versa* we see how it is the one he prefers himself, the one where “There is no research component: the visual art practice, together with its exhibition and supporting material, simply is the PhD.”³⁵ The basis for this model is that artistic practice can stand on its own, also as research, without having to borrow from other academic disciplines, and in this way be true to its own field of knowledge. According to Elkins, artists should therefore not be required to show competence in any areas other than where they belong:

I think this last and most radical possibility is also the most

33. Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place and the Everyday* (Rivers Oram Press, 2006), 204.

34. Ibid.

35. Elkins, “Printed Project,” 17.

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interesting. It is a logical endpoint for the new degree, because each of the foregoing models presupposes that visual art practice can be taken to the level of the doctorate. This last option is simply more consistent than the previous models, because it permits the visual art practice to carry the burden of competence that will allow it to be taken as a doctoral-level accomplishment *aside from* whatever writing might support or augment it.³⁶

The main point here is precisely what also constitutes my main criticism of Elkins' third model, namely the lack of *leakage*, or *transmission*. That which for Elkins is the preferred way to perform artistic research is in my opinion a research model that prevents a flow between disciplines, which for me is a very important outcome. I am therefore sceptical to the following description of this model: "The argument is basically that visual art practice should not borrow from other academic fields, but remain true to its own media and purposes."³⁷ On the contrary, it is the *leakage* of knowledge across research disciplines that makes artistic research *possible, useful, and important*.

As a supplement and also partially in contrast to Elkins' models, I would like to refer to the Swedish public investigation on artistic research called *Handslag, famntag, klapp eller kyss? : konstnärlig forskarutbildning i Sverige* written by Henrik Karlsson in 2002.³⁸ Karlsson uses Christopher Frayling's separation between three different kinds of research: research *into* art, research *through* art, and art *as* research.³⁹

Research *into* art is the kind which have been used to for some time, which contains all research on artists, art history, theory and aesthetics from a variety of perspectives such as social, political, economical, and structural perspectives. Decades, and even hundreds of years of research tradition have established strong discourses from these research fields, and they are well established within the university system since all of them were initially derived from existing research, deviating more in topic than in research method or scientific framework.

36. Elkins, "Printed Project," 17.

37. Ibid.

38. Karlsson, *Handslag, famntag, klapp eller kyss? : konstnärlig forskarutbildning i Sverige*.

39. Christopher Frayling, "Research in Art and Design," *Royal College of Art Research Papers* 1, no. 1 (1993/1994).

In Research *through* art, studies are made into the kind of tools artists work with, kinds of materials, digital techniques and so on. They have inherited models of research from natural sciences, much as the previous kind inherits methods from humanities and social sciences.

In Art *as* research, the end result of the research is an artefact, and the thought process that makes it research is embedded in the artefact. This is the kind of research that Karlsson defines as the most problematic. There is a clear difference in the view on this form of research between Karlsson and Elkins. Elkins considers this form as the most interesting and the one which probably is capable of establishing an independent artistic research discourse, while Karlsson sees problems in relation to the fact that this kind is furthest away from traditional science.

We could add an extra layer to this discussion, as Karlsson also does when he separates between research results and research methods. What is most important, the method or the result? And what is most important as a determinant for whether it is research or not? Surely artists can do research that results in artworks alone, even though the methods they use are not specifically artistic or have an artistic component. To decide whether the research is valid or not, the methodological framework becomes important. Darren Newbury is quoted by Karlsson in saying that: "One of the key criteria of doctoral work in my understanding is the notion that the work must be methodologically transparent."⁴⁰ The artwork itself, standing as a proof of artistic research, is defined as research through a documented methodological framework and a well-defined method. Newbury does not see how this can be achieved without some kind of written effort. But apart from this, exactly how artistic research becomes methodologically transparent is open. This opens up for a pragmatic view on the research result, because focus lies on the *how* and not the *what*.

We are once more getting close to the differences between theory and practice, reflection and action. Art has in various ways been identified as that which is able to bridge or transcend dualisms such as subject and object, theory and practice, and nature and culture. There is an immanent feature of artistic mediation that allows for the non-lingual, that which avoids analysis, to still act as a category for reflection. The step further to artistic research is not far: the idea that artistic research on reinforced grounds can bridge the gap between practice and theory is more or less

40. Karlsson, *Handslag, famntag, klapp eller kyss? : konstnärlig forskarutbildning i Sverige*, 42.

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implicit. This suggestion is wrongly justified through expectations that through artistic research the keys to the artistic process can be described and delivered in a mediated form, and that artistic research will provide a universal instrument where we effortlessly can jump from work-internal issues to conceptual analysis, and by this build a methodology that avoids the problem, or preferably dissolves the dichotomy between theory and practice.

But artistic research's ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice is unfortunately unfounded. The reason for this is because the keys required to interpret the artwork, required to unlock the synthesis of theory and practice, are not in the artist's possession—or, from the perspective of artistic research, they are not in the possession of the researching subject. The argument's premise here assumes that artists have all the cards in their hands and are the main conveyors of a work of art's content, which they are not. The moment a work of art enters its discourse, the artists lose influence over it and are arguably neither farther from nor closer to the work than any other. The knowledge the artist possesses is about the intentions and efforts leading up to the finished work. Or as Per Nilsson describes it: "Whatever it [art] later becomes, as an artwork its status is determined conjointly between the object and its various discourses."⁴¹ However, this should not be understood as supporting of a *laissez-faire* attitude to the work's intentions, rather the opposite. But the problem arises when we disregard the work's relationship to its specific discourse, a process that the artist does not control. For the same reason, artistic research cannot have this as a goal either, whether as a methodological principle or as an expected outcome.

However, artists know about the work's intentions or *modus operandi*, and they should presumably be able to connect the work's intentions to conceptual analysis or other forms of reflection, and this is where the value of artistic research lies. The loss of influence that artists face when a work of art enters into its proper context is compensated by the influence they have over the work's initial intentions and motives. No one is better suited to describe them, or, in a more complementary way, describe its conceptual premises. However, this is not a rational process, just as little as it is magical. It is in Per Nilsson's words *amphibic*, neither absolute knowledge nor practice-oriented relativism.⁴²

The summary of this discussion about artistic research's usefulness

41. Nilsson, *The Amphibian Stand*, 99.

42. *Ibid.*, 77.

should be as follows: the value, or usefulness, of artistic research is a result of the artist's attempts to connect the premises for the work's conception and realisation to general categories or conceptual analysis, whether this is done through artistic practice or theoretical reflection. Just as the work itself is connected to our culture when it enters its context, art meets research, and is therefore relevant for the same reason: it is included in its rightful element. The German philosopher Katrin Busch describes the relationship between art and philosophy in a similar way:

Art and theory, in effect, are nothing more than two different forms of practice interrelated through a system of interaction and transferences. In this constellation, philosophy neither brings the arts to the point nor does art sensualize philosophical truths; philosophy serves a knowledge-based artistic practice as a point of reference, similar, conversely, to how art might affect theoretical practice.⁴³

In my opinion, the formation and development of artistic research needs to be linked to the role that art plays in society. Or more specifically, that art is linked to society in the first place and is not an 'inert system.' Therefore, I would suggest that artistic research should be as open to science as art is to society. Open but pragmatic. The lack of a fully developed academic discourse calls for unconventional solutions that strive to use the best of both worlds. When we draw up a methodological framework for artistic research, the key requirement should therefore be flexibility. Swedish art theorist Sven-Olof Wallenstein emphasises the singular character of artistic research projects, and in this respect his approach is similar to the approach taken by Per Nilsson.⁴⁴ A singular project requires that the means of presenting it are conceived in the same way as the methods of investigation. The result is that the methodological frameworks for artistic research are something that succeed the very projects they are part of, not something that precedes it. Methodology comes after, or as in Sven-Olof Wallenstein's words:

One way of defining artistic research would be to regard it as being composed of highly specific and singular projects that

43. Katrin Busch, "Artistic Research and the Poetics of Knowledge," *Art&Research* 2, no. 2 (2009), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/busch.html>.

44. Sven-Olof Wallenstein, "Konst och forskning," *Glänta* 4 (2000).

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require multiple competences and within which different individual investigations might combine for shorter or longer periods of time. The nature of such projects is that the form of presentation, just like the research methodology must be invented. The rules of such activity always come afterwards, they do not precede practice, and they cannot be formulated as a system or a 'methodology'.⁴⁵

My purpose for this chapter has been to highlight the importance of a methodological basis for my research project in particular, and to touch on topics that have bearing on artistic research in general.

I have chosen an exploratory strategy for my research project, one that in many ways is not entirely unlike an archaeologist's. It consists of discoveries, excavations and findings, the result of practice and reflection. Hunches and assertions have informed my artistic choices just as much as in this text. The result is testament to the thick, or rather, 'messy' process of artistic research. Tim Ingold describes it well, albeit somewhat poetically, in his book *Making*:

To tell, in short, is not to explicate the world, to provide the information that would amount to a complete specification, obviating the need for would-be practitioners to inquire for themselves. It is rather to trace a path that others can follow. Thus the hunter, educated in stories of the chase, can follow a trail; the trained archaeologist can follow the cut; the competent reader can follow the line of writing.⁴⁶

All things considered, my aim is simply that it should be possible to 'follow the cut' my works have created, and that this text should map and elaborate on what is needed to this process to occur. It is to these works that we will now turn our attention to. The next chapter contains the descriptions of the nine works of art that were made as parts of this project. In line with what we have discussed in this chapter, I will let the works speak for themselves, in the sense that they will be described rather than dissected. It is my aim that this chapter justifies and explains why this is so. Firstly I claim, in line with Per Nilsson's reasoning, that works of art

45. Sven-Olof Wallenstein, "Art and Research," in *Artistic Research*, ed. Satu Kiljunen and Mika Hannula (Helsinki Academy of Fine Arts, 2002), 44.

46. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013).

are in themselves communicative and forms of knowledge production, albeit not scientific. Secondly, the aim is for the works to exist as equal to the text—this is the position I have chosen in the dialectics of practice versus theory. It is also why the next chapter with the work descriptions follows this one, as my aim has been to position the relationship between this text and the artworks to each other.

4 Exhibited Works

This chapter introduces and describes the nine works of art which, together with this text, make up the thesis as a whole. The works relate exclusively to computer games, and as such they represent works of art within the Game Art genre as it has developed for the last twenty years or so. The processes leading up to them, together with the realisation of the works themselves, played a vital role for selecting the topics discussed in this text: they have in many ways set the agenda for the scope of this thesis. My choice of topics has arisen from the process of working with these pieces. They are also in turn a part of the questions raised throughout the text, as a form of artistic result or at least commentary, on aspects such as physicality, spatiality, playability and rule systems. As such, the artworks map and exemplify the ways that games, play, and art relate to each other. Some of these aspects will be discussed in the following work descriptions.

Below is a list of exhibitions and the corresponding works included in the PhD project, consisting of nine works of art presented at two solo exhibitions, six group shows, two live performances, and in one printed magazine. The works were made between 2003 and 2011:

Site and Date	Exhibited works
Galleri Box (separate)	
Jan 2003, Gothenburg	...and then you die! This One Belongs to Heaven Ballpark
Kunstnersenteret M & R	
Mar 2003, Molde, Norway	...and then you die!
BIFF	
Oct 2004, Bergen, Norway	Too Close for Comfort
Beta 2.0	
May 2005, Bergen, Norway	The Big Ifs...
Åga:rum	
May 2005, Ekenäs, Finland	Veøy
300m3 Art Space	
Separate show	The Big Ifs...
Sept 2006, Gothenburg	Veøy Too Close for Comfort Epicenter
300m3 Art Space	
Mar 2008, Gothenburg	Don't Quit Your Daydream
OEI (magazine)	
Mar 2010	You Flee From Combat
Galleri Box	
Sep 2010, Gothenburg (OEI)	You Flee From Combat
Hey it's Enrico Pallazzo	
Oct 2010, Gothenburg	You Flee From Combat
Retro Video Games	
Apr 2011, Stockholm	Too Close for Comfort
A-venue	
Apr 2016, Gothenburg	Don't Quit Your Daydream

4.1 ...and then you die! (2003)

The following three works, *...and then you die!*, *This One Belongs to Heaven*, and *Ballpark* were shown at a solo exhibition at Galleri Box in Gothenburg, January 2003. They were all made as games that the viewer could

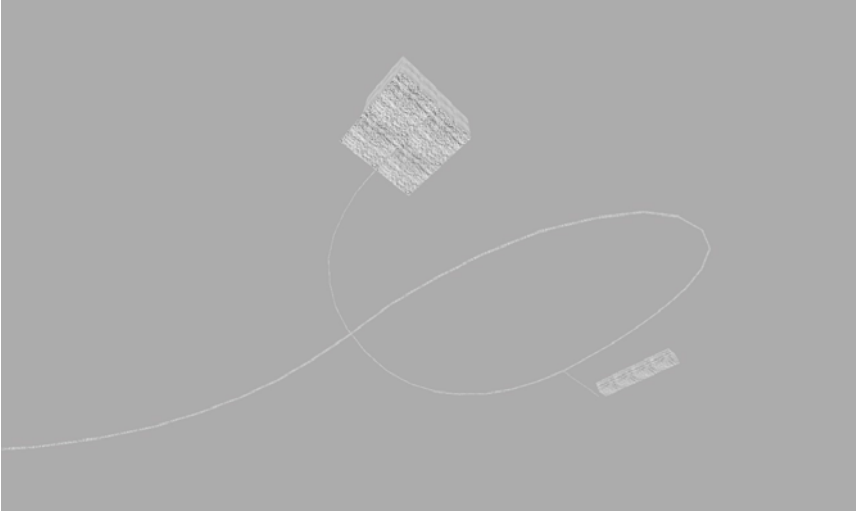


Figure 4.1: Screenshot from *...and then you die!*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2003. A thin walking path leads up to the top of a spiral. The path seen from above has the shape of an infinity sign.

play.¹ The intention with these works was to expose viewers to situations that required their attention and initiative. I wanted to play with their will and initiative to strive for results and progression by exposing them to my own closed system of partly dysfunctional rules, which denies the gratification that is latent in the completion of a computer game. All three pieces are clean and simple from a technological standpoint, even primitive compared to most computer games *per se*—story-telling elements were kept to a minimum. My intention was to keep the works from *telling* a story as a linear narrative presented to the viewer. Instead, I wanted viewers to engage in *play* as the primary mode of attention, much in line with what Daniel Vella describes in the following quote:

This already implies an important insight into the nature of games as aesthetic objects: namely, that it is not the experience of perceiving a performance, but the experience of performing the act, which is what matters – and, therefore, that

1. As mentioned in the introduction, a viewer in this context is meant in the broadest sense of the word, with all senses and bodily capabilities. It refers to the subject that meets a work of art, whether it is by playing it, visiting it, viewing it or by any other means engaging in a work of art.

it is not the result of the performance that is the object to be grasped aesthetically (the experienced movement of the dance), but the act *itself*, in its intrinsic value (the experience of *performing* the movement).²

The lack of story-telling in works like these does not mean that the game worlds are devoid of causality or common recognisable symbols—they are not abstract as such. Rather, what they have in common is that nothing happens unless the viewer provides some kind of input, navigating through the game space using a controller. The mode of the viewer here is not so much a reader as a player. These works were made in contrast to highly story driven video games such as *Myst* by Cyan, a game published in 1993, considered to be a landmark for story driven games.³

From a technological standpoint these three pieces are game mods, which means that they are made as modifications of already existing games, in this case Unreal Tournament. The process of making them is deeply dependent upon the use of game editors, which in turn makes it possible to use the underlying game engine. These are complex systems requiring a high degree of competence before it is possible to make a game that works in the intended way. The Unreal Engine was the most accessible engine at the time these works were made, through the use of UnreadEd which is the corresponding graphical editor, where most of the parameters are set. The main challenge, besides learning how to make all the pieces work together to become a working game environment, was to remove the already existing components that make up the Unreal Tournament game: points, messages, heads up display, health, and all the other things that make up the full first-person shooter experience. In these works I only the physics engine and an engine to enforce the rules for dying. Each time you die, it triggers the built-in death animations and ‘respawns’ you at the starting point again. Nothing else from the game is used and had to be removed through coding, which was the most complex part of the process. I mention this to give an impression on how the work was made in practice.

Even if the later works used different approaches and different frameworks, the procedure is similar to this example. Either it is additive, in the

2. Daniel Vella, “The Ludic Muse: The Form of Games as Art,” *CounterText* 02, no. 1 (2016): 70–71, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/count.2016.0040>.

3. Andrew Hutchison, “Making the Water Move: Techno-Historic Limits in the Game Aesthetics of *Myst* and *Doom*,” *Gamestudies.org* 08 (2008), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hutch>; Brøderbund, *Myst*, Cyan Inc., 1993.



Figure 4.2: ...and then you die!, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2003. Installation view. *When ...and then you die!* was exhibited in Kunstnersenteret Møre og Romsdal (Møre and Romsdal Art Centre) I based the textures on the room where it was shown.

sense that you start with nothing and then you add each component one after another until you have a fully working game environment, or your procedure is reductive, in the sense that you modify an already existing platform to serve your needs, which could be even more difficult than starting from zero. Since 2003, when this work was made, free or cheap game engines have become available, giving you full ability to make any form of game you want.

The piece called *...and then you die!* (see Figure 4.1) consists of a thin path formed as an ascending spiral.⁴ Any time viewers step outside of the small platform or the thin path, they end up falling to the ground below, with overly exaggerated screams and gory effects as the character dies. Seen from above, the path forms an infinity sign, a metaphor for an eternal loop as opposed to a linear progression. Walking upwards, the viewer meets different distractions in the form of peeping holes, which turn out to be a form of punishment: the viewer is pulled into the hole, killed, and forced to watch different looped film sequences. After death,

4. The show as a whole had the same title as this work. Arne Kjell Vikhagen, "*...and then you die!*", Game art installation, January 2001, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/53864>.

the viewer starts off at the beginning again, at the bottom of the path. The cyclic element of the whole piece stands in contrast to a feeling of progression, as the viewer gets better and better at walking up the thin path. There seems to be an end point at the top, but it turns out to have the same result as before: the viewer's linear and progressive initiative is forced into a loop.

4.2 This One Belongs to Heaven (2003)

This One Belongs to Heaven (see Figure 4.3) is a piece where the viewer is placed on top of a platform from which there is nothing to do besides jumping, preferably by using a slide that looks like a ski jump.⁵ The objective, if any, is to hit one of three holes on the ground, something which requires considerable skill. Should the viewers succeed in this, the result is similar to what happens in *...and then you die!*. When you hit the ground and die, you are transported back to the top of the platform again. The holes, which are there simply to tempt the initiative of the viewer, are traps which also lead to their immediate death. The viewer is locked into a cycle of events. In many ways, *This One Belongs to Heaven* is a twin to *...and then you die!*. The same false gratification system is present here too, and the cyclical structure is similar between them. They were exhibited together as well, as two projections in the same room.

4.3 Ballpark (2003)

The third piece, *Ballpark* (see Figure 4.4), is a bit different from *...and then you die!* and *This One Belongs to Heaven*.⁶ The strong focus on life, death, progression, and gratification is absent here. There are no elements in this piece that are playable in the sense that it can be interacted with, and it is impossible for viewers to die or inflict any damage to themselves. Instead, the viewer is left with the option to walk through a huge landscape without ever finding anything more than the same stylistic, low-resolution landscape. The viewer is left to explore. *Ballpark* was intended to be a contrast to the other pieces, to negate their emphasis on

5. Arne Kjell Vikhagen, *This One Belongs to Heaven*, Game art installation, January 2001, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/53864>.

6. Arne Kjell Vikhagen, *Ballpark*, Game art installation, January 2001, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/53864>.

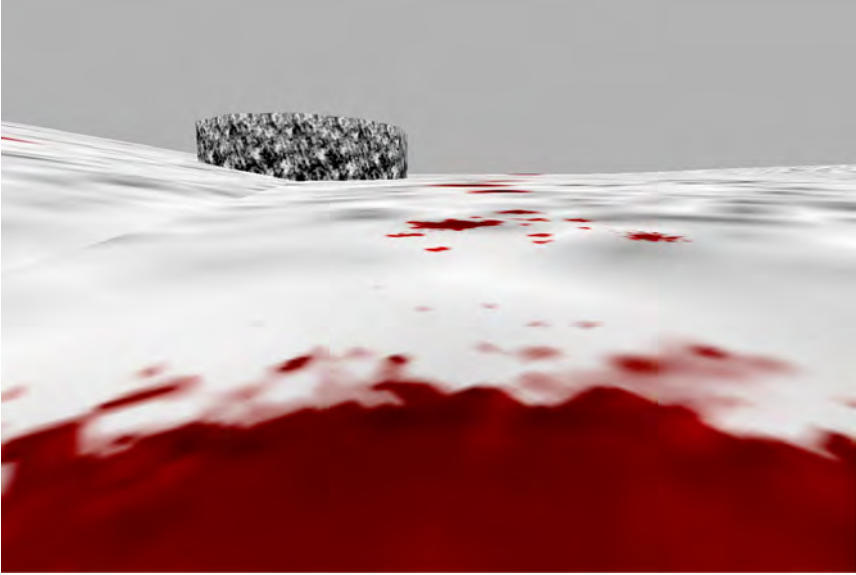


Figure 4.3: Screenshot from *This One Belongs to Heaven*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2003, showing one of the holes in the ground.

the binary symbolism of life and death, and as a contrast to their exaggerated effects and spectacle.

The deterministic systems that the first two pieces represent, through the way they enforce their rule systems and their significations of first-person shooter games, are negated in *Ballpark*. The correlation between the metaphor of life and player progression in first-person shooter games is deterministic and predictable, and my intention for these three works was to exploit this to address the viewer's striving towards progression and gratification.

The making of these three works provoked a process of reflection about the way I relate to the technology and the particular modes of production it offers. Artists that work with computer-based art must relate their work to the traditions that exist within this field, as is expected from any artwork; they always come from somewhere, and that somewhere brings with it a heritage from which it is difficult, if not impossible, to detach. The technology used to produce Game Art is as such linked to its aesthetics through the heritage the technology carries with it. The encounter between a work of art and its aesthetic tradition is however ambiguous. On the one hand it provides a discourse in which the work can expand

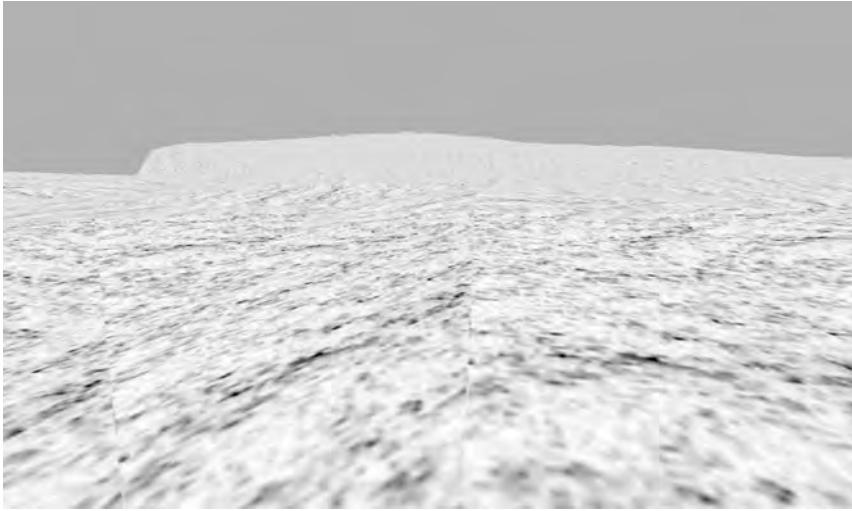


Figure 4.4: Screenshot from *Ballpark*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2003. A landscape with seemingly no end or beginning and without playable elements. The visitor is left to explore the world.

and thrive, allowing viewers to use their acquired competence as they meet the work. On the other hand, it tends to give the artwork a label which is more related to the *how* than to the *what*. In the case of computer-based art, artworks are commonly associated with interactive devices and gadgets that react when you push a button. The newness of new media technologies can be counter-productive for artists who work with it. Their works run the risk of disappearing behind the *spectacle of the machine*. The newness and spectacle of new media art, as a result of spectacular technological possibilities, tends to relieve the viewer from critical judgement—or the other way around: the surface of new media art creates a gap between form and content that the viewer is sometimes unable to bridge, which results in a criticism based on form and not content. Even though new media art is now no longer very new at all, artists who work with computer-based art still need to address these aspects of their work process. There is a thin line between an artwork that is spectacular for its own sake, and one that is spectacular because it is able to open a channel between the artwork and its viewers.

To peel off the décor of novelty has been one of my main concerns. In my work using computer game engines to make installations within the gallery space, I have aimed to reduce the spectacle of the machine by

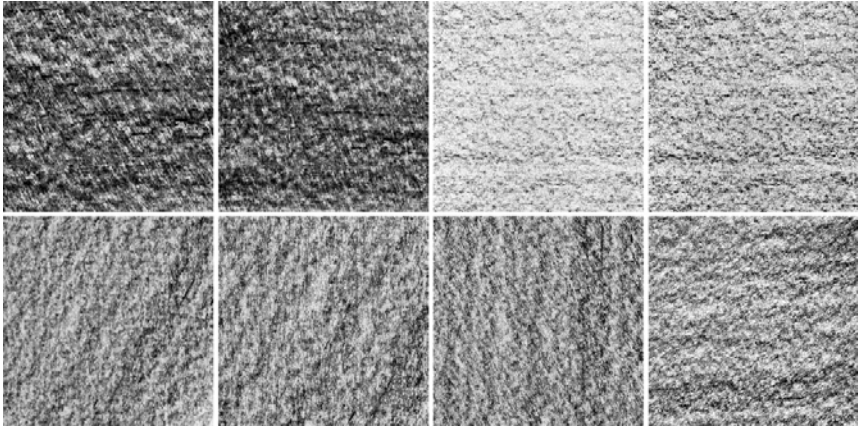


Figure 4.5: *Texture examples. The most frequent texture used in my projects is the brightest one, third from the left on the upper row. You can see an example on how the textures are used in Figure 4.4.*

reducing the décor to a bare minimum. For instance, when working with *textures*, I chose to make them as simple as possible.⁷ Game engine technology permits textures to be truly elaborate when it comes to layering, blending, light properties, reflections and so on—most of which I do not use. For instance, my most frequently used texture consists of a scanned image of a drawing where I have scribbled with a pencil on paper (see Figure 4.5).

Even though I try to keep my work as simple as possible, they are still entangled with the spectacle of new media art. In fact, it could almost be the other way around through the negation of newness. Through a lo-fi or nostalgic patina, it can inadvertently point to what is not there. To have computers present in a gallery space can be problematic; the visible presence of the spectacle of technology risks gaining precedence over what the work is trying to express. In this case, the *screen* between the work and the viewer is not transparent enough. My aim is to make the audience focus on the work instead of the distraction of the screen. The dominant force in the perception of a work when the *screen* is visible is not the work being mediated, but the mediation of the work. The reason why I deliberately reduce the quality is not only to distance the work from the newness of media art, or from the spectacle of the machine, but

7. Textures are small, often repeatable patterns applied to physical objects, terrains and other elements inside a graphical environment to give it a visible structure.

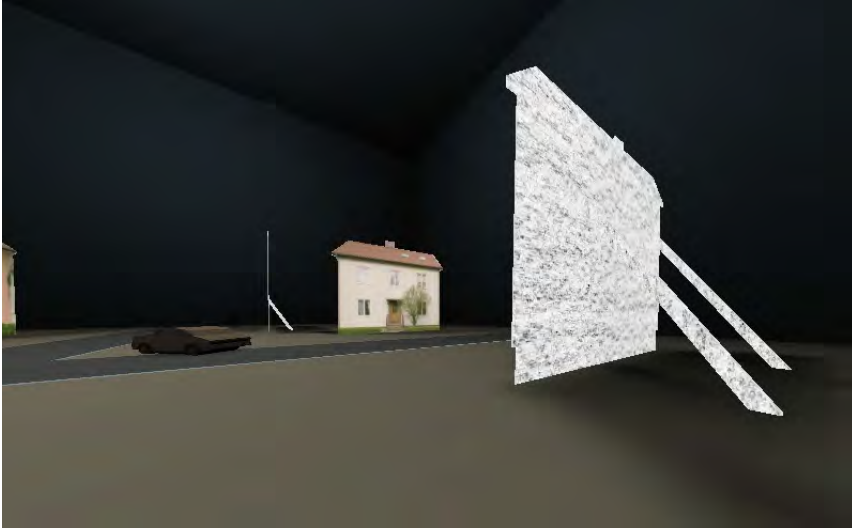


Figure 4.6: *Reuse of old textures.* In this scene from *Don't Quit Your Daydream*, 2008, I have reused the same texture that I made in 2003 for the exhibition at Gallery BOX, to make the supporting structure for the façades.

in general terms because I want to emphasise that my works have been made by someone. I want to invite the viewer into the work by making the mode of production visible, as opposed to a form of digital representation that hides the mode of production from the unsuspecting viewer. I want to reduce the level of specialisation that is required to engage in my work, which I suspect would otherwise obstruct their experience.⁸

The discussion of the spectacle of the machine is indirectly a discussion of the *how* and the *what*, the form and the content. In my opinion, an artwork's form and content are inseparable, and to conceptually think them apart is counter-productive. But the technological development that more often than not turns the materiality of Game Art, and new media art in general, on its head forces us to consider the viewers' ability to apply their skills to connect to the work. The understanding of a work's materiality is a skill that requires informed viewers. The roles are, in this sense, inverted compared to a traditional situation where the public has been given years or even decades to learn how to relate to material and conceptual developments within that particular tradition.

8. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke Univ. Press, 1992), 147.

Within new media art, and Game Art in particular, these cycles last only months. Adorno's theory of the slow development of the aesthetic material, and how this material creates immanent crises for art, is completely side-stepped by the sheer speed of the material development in new media art. No one can at any point in time grasp the full picture of what the material has to offer. What instead drives art forward is whether the ever-changing technological premises succeed in being perceived as aesthetic material or not.

4.4 Too Close for Comfort (2004)

Too Close for Comfort is a piece made for a group exhibition in conjunction with the Bergen International Film Festival in 2004.⁹ It was also shown in a solo exhibition in 2006. The piece consists of a film sequence that is two and a half minutes long. The screen is split in two, with two animations running in sync with each other (see Figure 4.7 on page 83). The first part consists of a recorded game sequence from an old flight simulator game, where the player is crashing into the World Trade Center in New York. The other part consists of a character running on a flat, green surface.¹⁰ At the same time as the plane crashes into the tower, the character in the other animation falls into what turns out to be a gorge or hole, either from the ground or from the roof of a large building.

Too Close for Comfort is a bit different from the other works that I have done as a part of this thesis. Firstly, it is a so-called Machinima¹¹ piece and not an interactive game as such. In that way, it is simpler than my other work since it is not playable—it is a documentation of someone playing a game. However, I prefer to think of the piece as interactive to some degree, even though it is not in the instrumental sense of the word; my intention is to relate my acts as a player to the potential acts of the viewer. As such, I serve as a proxy for acts that the viewer could have made.

Secondly, it is based on my associations of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. My works are usually

9. Arne Kjell Vikhagen, *Too Close for Comfort*, Machinima animation, August 2004, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/53864>.

10. This work has also been exhibition as a version where only the recorded game sequence is included and the running character is omitted.

11. The Machinima genre include films or animations that are made through the use of game engines. They are not interactive in the instrumental sense of the word.



Figure 4.7: Film still from *Too Close for Comfort* (2004), Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2004. The screen was split in two parts with synced sequences running on each side.

not this specific in terms of the choice of topic—they are usually more associative. The flight simulator I used in the piece was *Flight Simulator II* made by SubLOGIC and released for the Commodore Amiga computer in 1986.¹² The only buildings in the game, except airport towers, were landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge, Empire State Building, and the World Trade Center. The two towers presented the potential mission to fly between the towers and come out intact on the other side.¹³

The associative link between a real event of such magnitude and a game I played as a child could be the result of a form of regression, as a way to grasp the scope of the event. There is a stylistic effect in the crude graphics that disconnects the viewer from the actual event, even though the link to the September 11 attack is obvious. My intention was to focus on the metaphor of the act: an act that seems innocent enough in a computer game can give strong associations when something outside of the game matters more, and gives weight to what is happening inside the game. My acts inside the game serve as a metaphor for acts in actual life, which creates links between the game and the viewer's visual memory.

With *Too Close for Comfort* I wanted to create a stylistic representation of the September 11 attacks that related to my immediate association

12. Bruce Artwick, *Flight Simulator II*, SubLOGIC, 1986.

13. The fascination for the World Trade Center in *Flight Simulator II* might have been shared by other gamers as well: when Microsoft later bought *Flight Simulator II* from SubLOGIC and released *Flight Simulator III* in 1988, it had a cover image of a plane that was flying with the World Trade Center in the background as if it just had flown between the towers.

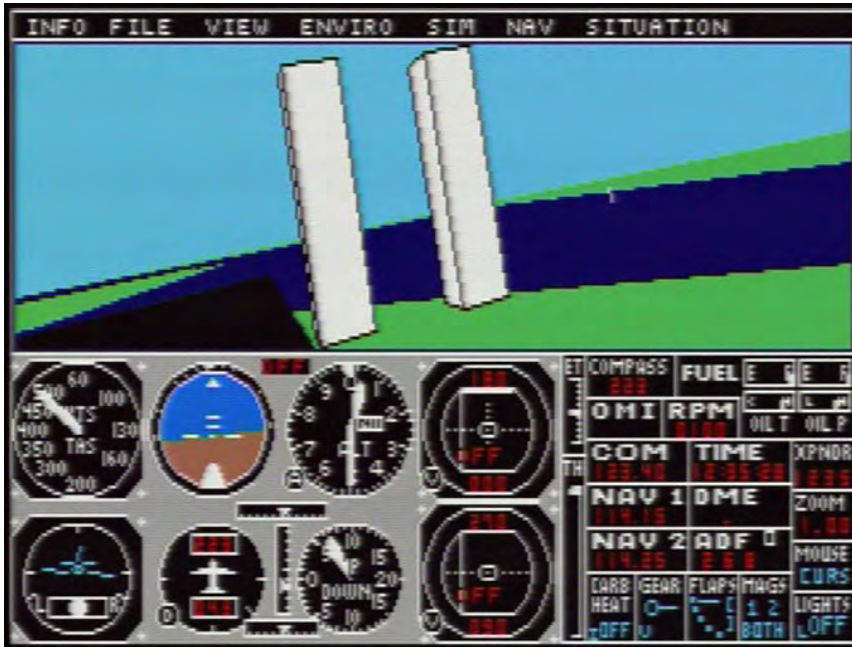


Figure 4.8: Film still from *Too Close for Comfort*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2004, right before the plane crashes into one of the towers of World Trade Center.

to the event. In the wake of the attacks, flight simulators were blamed for facilitating acts of terrorism, as they were used by the terrorists to improve their flying skills.¹⁴ Crash scenes and disaster scenarios were also consequently removed from them to distance the games from the real event and the collective trauma. Whether these adjustments were justified and purposeful or not is another topic and outside the scope of this text, but it shows that games are strong cultural indicators, which is also signified by debates in the media concerning video games and violent behaviour and acts of terror.

4.5 Veøy (2005)

This piece was first shown in the group exhibition *Äga:rum* in Ekenäs, Finland, which was arranged by Pro Artibus between May and September

14. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "Outline of the 9/11 Plot - Staff Statement No. 16":2, accessed August 1, 2017, http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/staff_statement_16.pdf.

2005.¹⁵ *Åga:rum* was curated by Gun Holmström.

The piece is centred on the island Veøy on the west coast of Norway. Historically, it played a central role in the region as a centre for religion and trade from the Viking age and up to the black plague (AD 8-900 to 1350), but since then the island has been more or less abandoned, and there are only a few traces left of its history. There are no inhabitants on the island and there are very few visitors except from the occasional boat tourists and some religious festivities. Due to its former status as a centre for religion and trade, Veøy plays a central role for the local population through myths, tales, and folklore, as well as a place for leisure and enjoyment.¹⁶

During my childhood, I have heard many stories about Veøy, nurturing or enhancing the myths of the island. Now when I am older, Veøy still attracts my interest, probably because it hosts many of my childhood memories, and because its history from the early ages up to the middle ages remains a mystery. It is open for each to speculate about what really went on there. In this work I tried to present Veøy by making the distance between what I know and what I imagine about it visible.

The piece consists of a big landscape that is built with a game engine. It is shown as a video projection on a wall, together with a podium where a trackball is placed. Viewers can then interact with the piece through a very simple navigation setup—forward and backwards, plus a subjective point-of-view camera that also governs the direction of movement as well as the viewpoint. Viewers can freely walk wherever they want on the island. I have placed images inside the virtual environment on certain places which correspond to the same location and angle where the images were taken. The images I have selected are from various sources to get an impression of how the island look like: archaeological sketches, family photos, historical images, and topographical images. It was important for me that the viewer gets a sense of physicality, and that the island on which they are walking actually has a corresponding physical space and that there is a physical distance even inside the game (see Figures 4.9 and 4.12). But even still, the scale the work represents is a construction and smaller than the actual island itself. The game space and the actual space is not mimetic, but rather an interpretation that breaks the tem-

15. Arne Kjell Vikhagen, *Veøy*, Game art installation, May 2005, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/53864>.

16. Romsdalsmuseet, *Årbok - Veøya* (Molde: Romsdalsmuseet, 1992); Romsdalsmuseet, *Årbok - Veøy Kirke* (Molde: Romsdalsmuseet, 2008).



Figure 4.9: Screenshot from *Veøy*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2004, that shows the images that were placed at the location which corresponds to where they were taken.

poral aspect of *here-and-now* through the mix of references to different times, and breaks the relation between the physical distance in the game and on the actual island. In my opinion, games have a tremendous capability to represent space, place, and time, and the same time allow for a sense of presence inside them.

The initial motivation for working with this project was based on reflections regarding how a physical place can influence your sense of identity. What does it mean to have a place from which we ‘come from?’ Apart from the importance of belonging to a certain nationality or to a certain culture, it has been the local aspect that has interested me. The island Veøy represents to me a local site that works as a hub for the contextual framework that in turn contributes to an individual’s sense of belonging. Correspondingly, the site also excludes the uninitiated. There is a gap that is impossible to bridge. The piece is somehow built on this presumption as it does not intend to give a coherent and complete account, but to disrupt and present fragments, similar to the way archaeological narratives are constructed.

I tried to obtain map data of the island, to get as close to the actual topography as possible. The first map data I got from the National Mapping Authority in Norway consisted of data from both Veøy and its surrounding area, 25 kilometres in radius, as seen in Figure 4.11.

However, the data did not have the resolution I needed to get an accu-

4 Exhibited Works

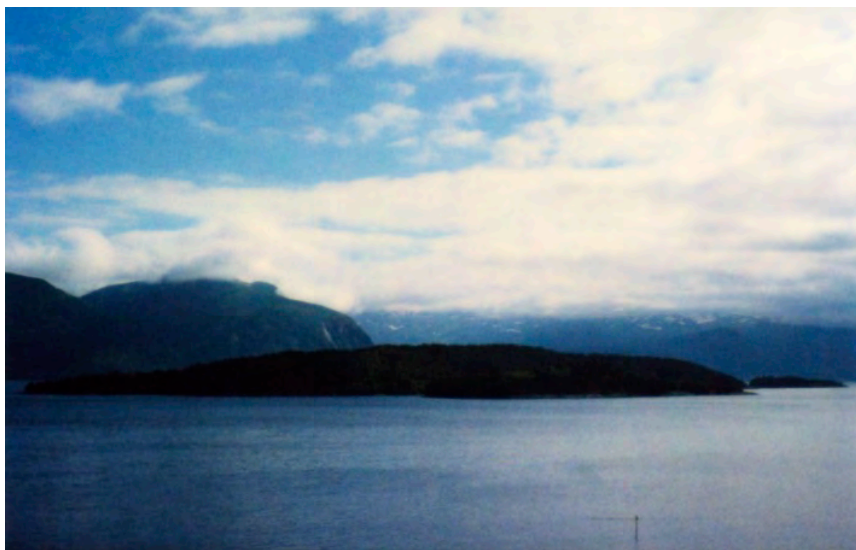


Figure 4.10: *The island Veøy. The centrality in the Romsdal fjord is what made Veøy an important centre for trade and religion in the middle ages.*

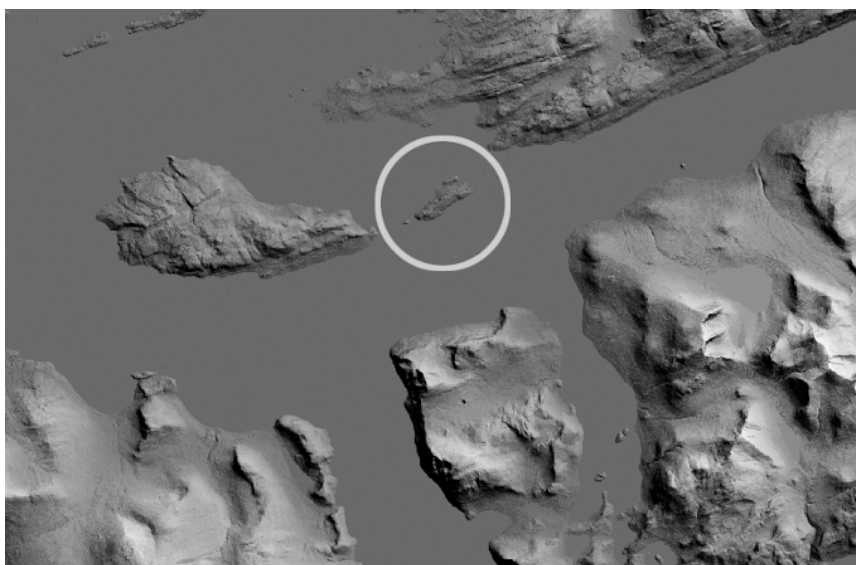


Figure 4.11: *Veøy and its surroundings based on topographical data. The island inside the circled area is Veøy. It came to be a centre for trade and religion at a time when most communications depended on the sea (the steep fjords prevent travel on land).*

Value	Count	Description
2001	61	Contour line
3001	19	Coastline
5001	6	Roof edge (building)
6251	5	Ancient monument, border
6602	1	Jetty, edge
7414	3	Path
8013	2	High voltage line
9111	1	Misc contour edge
2101	8	Terrain point
2102	19	Height point (elevation/hill)
6251	4	Ancient monument (point)
8602	22	High voltage pole

Table 4.1: *Excerpt from a sis-file describing the occurrence of ancient monuments and other points of interest on Veøy (my translation from Norwegian).*

rate three-dimensional model of the island, even if it had high resolution compared to other electronic maps for that time. The next map data I got from the National Mapping Authority in Norway was much more exact (see Figure 4.13). The file did not only give me a reasonably exact topographical representation of the island, but also an index of economic, cultural, or archaeological points of interest, as well as their location. (see Table 4.1).

When I built the island inside the game engine, I found that one of the main properties to consider, and also something of a caveat, was the aspect of scale. The scale determines to a large degree which relation the viewer will get to the sense of the actual island's physicality. The choice of scale is also a way for me to play with the work's significance: by making small adjustments I can significantly change the perceived size of a certain environment. If we assume that there is a relation of influence between the work and the viewer—the artist is not included in this argument—then scale is one of the elements that has an impact on this balance: it partly has to do with how the viewers perceive themselves in relation to the work, and in turn how much influence the viewers can have on the work. This is especially important in works like *Veøy*. I wanted to find a way to represent the island so that the viewers would

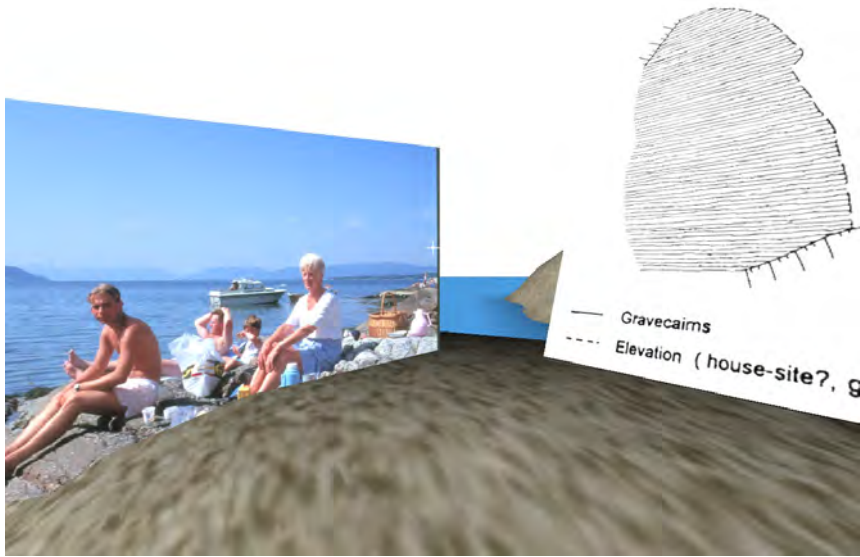


Figure 4.12: Screenshot from *Veøy*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2005. Images from family albums are mixed with sketches from archaeological excavations.

feel small and insignificant, without making it too much of an effort to move around inside the game.

Besides the reflections around scale and the accurate modelling of the island inside the game engine, another main element in this work is the connection to the archaeological findings at Veøy. The piece is inspired by the archaeological work of Brit Solli, who did her PhD project on the island. Her dissertation “Narratives of Veøy” has been a valuable source of information, not only from an archaeological point of view and for the valuable information she provides about Veøy, but because her research centres on the *reading* of her results.¹⁷ Her work concerns the reading that takes place whenever she is faced with archaeological findings, which for the uninitiated might seem a straightforward and scientific process. Instead, and similarly to my own process, Solli chose to emphasise what she calls the “poetics of archaeology:”

Throughout the research history of archaeology the scientifics have constituted the most inter-personal and community controlled part of the discipline. While the poetics of

17. Brit Solli, “Narratives of Veøy: An Investigation into the Poetics and Scientifics of Archaeology” (PhD diss., Oslo Universitet, 1996).

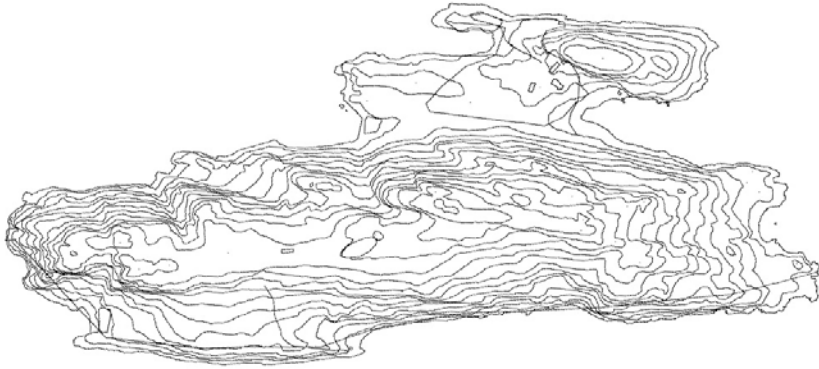


Figure 4.13: *Image rendered from the SIS-file of Veøy.*

archaeology, which I consider to be involved in the over-all theoretical composition of an investigation including both fieldwork, source-criticism, and the writing of the material past into the present, have been considered to be marginal and unscientific. I shall maintain that the scientific and poetics of archaeology are of equal importance in the writing of archaeologies.¹⁸

What is the basis of new knowledge that is obtained by archaeological research? She accounts in depth for her own role as a researching subject meeting the site, but also the folklore that comes with it, making her experience a part of the investigation. The exploratory approach that Solli chose has been an inspiration to me and a guideline for my own attitude towards my work. The value of exploration could at first glance seem to be preparatory or supplementary, but exploration can be a driving force in itself in artistic practice as well as in research fields such as archaeology.

18. Ibid., 17.

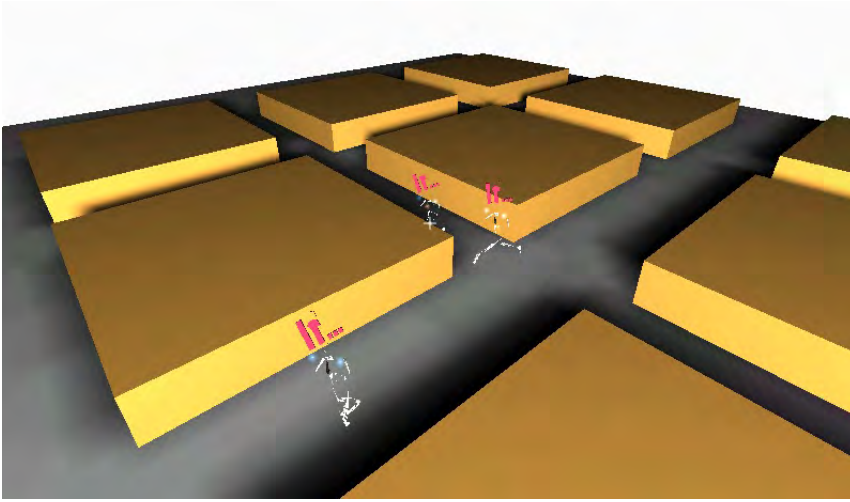


Figure 4.14: Screenshot from *The Big Ifs...*, seen from above.

4.6 The Big Ifs...(2005)

This is the most game-like piece in the series of works I have made. *The Big Ifs...* was first shown at *Beta 2.0*, a one-day festival in Bergen, in May 2005 that had its focus on theatre and performance art. The festival had a casual setting, and the piece was installed in a bar lounge. People were able to access the piece as if it was an ordinary arcade game—they could make noise and have fun in a relaxed setting. That is why I chose a style of game that would be close to how an ordinary first-person shooter would look like. The so-called *gore level*¹⁹ was set to maximum as a way to create a silly and exaggerated situation in the slapstick tradition.

The Big Ifs... takes its starting point from an English expression which is used to describe life's big questions. I chose to interpret the expression in a literal way, by making huge 'If...' signs as characters in a mod game. I made the 'If...' characters considerably larger than the player, giving the impression of complete superiority. The game arena resembles a block of city streets, with narrow streets for the player to hide (see Figure 4.14). However, the 'Ifs...' are programmed to search in such a way that there are no places for the player to hide. Even though the player has a weapon

19. In the Unreal game engine, the effect level is adjusted by the gore level, which in this case was set to maximum. This means that there would be a lot of blood, body parts, and other effects when the characters shoot at each other in the game.

to defend herself, the 'Ifs...' are impossible to defeat. The result in the end will always be given: the player will be defeated every time, no matter which actions are taken from the player's side. However, the player is encouraged to resist the inevitable. My main intention with the piece was to evoke the viewer's initiative to fight back.

4.7 *Epicenter* (2006)

The piece *Epicenter* consists of a large graphical environment which is mostly empty and white. The viewer is situated in a weightless, floating state. The viewer can move in all directions, and the movement is not restrained or influenced by gravitation or other forces. The only visible elements in the space are skeletons, all faced towards the middle of the space.²⁰ Their postures are twisted and deformed as if a force has just been released. The density of skeletons increases as the viewer moves closer towards the middle. Right in the middle, the skeletons are close together, forming a sort of ground zero (see Figure 4.15).

The ambient sound in the game consists of a looped radio noise, which increases in strength towards the epicentre. The centre is also the only light source, so all shadows are directed outwards from the centre, intended to establish a sense of direction or comparison for the viewers while they move towards the periphery and need directions back to the centre of the space. The result is that the scene goes from completely white to a chaotic arrangement of red skeletons where the sound and light are at its strongest.

Epicenter conveys a simultaneous sense of powerlessness and tranquility. The floating effect that comes with the zero-gravity environment makes the viewer's movements peaceful and flowing. The audio is meant to give the viewers an impression that they are witnessing a past event that they constantly get to relive.

My intention was to make the viewer explore a space that I've built up for them and associate to what they do and what they experience. It is the element of exploration that is important in *Epicenter*. I want viewers

20. The skeletons occur in several other pieces apart from *Epicenter*, and with the exception of *Too Close for Comfort* all playable characters are skeleton. In *Epicenter* they are related to the symbolism of death and dying, but they are also an aesthetic choice that was made to distance the works from the stereotypical representation of gender in games.



Figure 4.15: Screenshot from Epicenter, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2006.



Figure 4.16: Screenshot from Epicenter, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2006.

to get the feeling that they are trapped in time, reluctant witnesses to a traumatic event that is constantly repeating itself.

Epicenter communicates with its viewers in the manner of a computer game: through the physical intervention of the viewer in a constructed game space. It ruptures the viewers' expected mode of reading, and instead engages them in exploration of the game space. However, it is not given that the viewer will engage in *play*, just like how the player of a computer game can step away from the game and look and reflect on their gameplay. Many factors determine whether it is possible for the viewer to engage in play or not; the context of the piece and the cultural background of the viewer are key to enable them to engage in a computer game. The context, for instance when showing the piece in a gallery, has specific bearings on how the viewer behaves and filters what they are confronted with. Both openness and protective filters come into play here. Viewers are usually open and curious towards new expressions and associations when entering a gallery, but at the same time they might keep a distance to what they will encounter in it, as a natural way to *protect* themselves for whatever might happen.

Cultural background, or maybe cultural competence, is also at play: if the viewers are familiar with the cultural codes connected to the use of computer games, it can be expected that they are more inclined to apply these competences when they experience the piece. *Epicenter* and other pieces work differently depending on whether the viewer is used to playing computer games or not, which is evident in the way different people approach the piece, and the time it takes for them to "break the code" of the piece—how to navigate and process what is in front of them—varies significantly.

4.8 Don't Quit Your Daydream (2008)

Don't Quit Your Daydream was made as a part of the group exhibition called *MyComputer* at 300m3 Art Space Gothenburg, curated by Olle Essvik and Erik Boström, in March 2008.²¹ The focus of the exhibition was to show how art has been influenced aesthetically through the use of computers.

One of the starting points for *Don't Quit Your Daydream* was to link the

21. Arne Kjell Vikhagen, *Don't Quit Your Daydream*, Game art installation, March 2008, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/53864>.

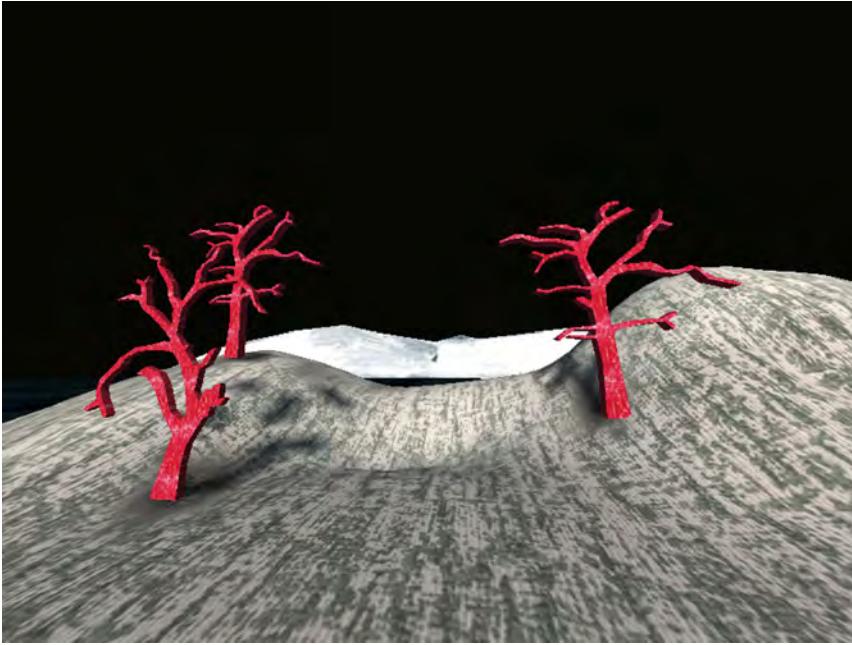


Figure 4.17: Screenshot from *Don't Quit Your Daydream*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2008.

aesthetic expression of the piece to the tradition of painting, as I knew the exhibition would include paintings and generally connect computer art to traditional techniques. The project is also based on my own associations: I chose to work with sets where mountains, trees, and houses are built in a way that to me is reminiscent of theatrical scenery. I wanted to construct a pseudo-nature of sorts, built on mechanics and façades.

Don't Quit Your Daydream consists of an environment built in a video game engine with three separate environments the viewer can explore. The most extensive and central level consists of an island out at sea, surrounded by mountains and horizons. The sky is completely black, but the mountains are bright. The ocean is dark brown and ochre. The presence of organic life is represented through flat, red trees which are sporadically placed throughout the island. They intend to give the impression of being mass-produced with only a few different varieties, so the viewer can easily discover that they are not unique but clones of each other. The second space is built as a stylistic street corner with façades of houses, similar to a stripped film set. The sun is hanging from the ceiling. The third space consists of a small room where monochrome animations from suburban

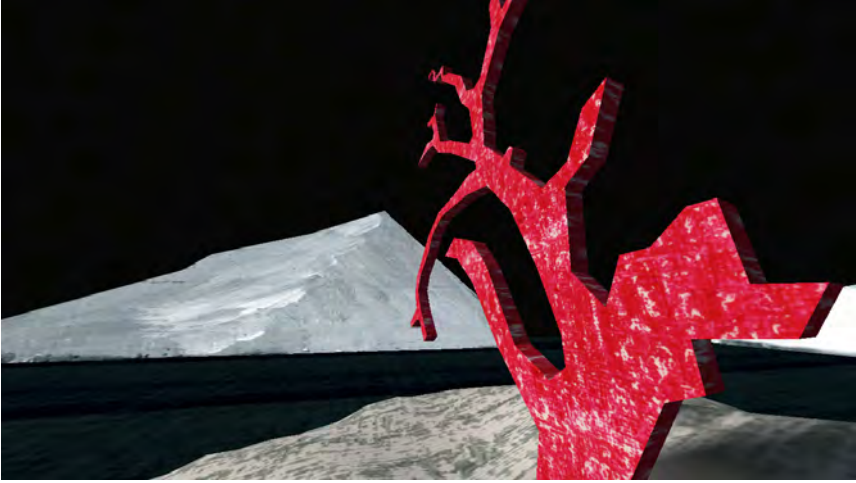


Figure 4.18: Screenshot from *Don't Quit Your Daydream*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2008.

houses are projected on the walls.

Don't Quit Your Daydream links up with *Ballpark* and *Veøy* in the sense that they are all scenic constructions of natural landscapes, and the two former are both islands. They were all made with the Unreal Engine, which was not particularly well suited to make terrain and islands at the time. The Far Cry engine Sandbox was much better, in the sense that it better supported large-scale landscapes, but I decided not to use it as it was too smooth and elegant—it did not provide the gritty polygon texture I wanted. There is a certain textuality in the jagged representation of smooth lines that I much prefer to the photo-realistic way that game engines such as Sandbox draws landscapes. It wanted the world in these works to stand out as imperfect and glitchy. They are constructed but still landscapes.

In any case these works are made of landscapes which are more exploratory than ludic, more scenic than confrontational—especially *Don't Quit Your Daydream*. I have worked earlier with constructed landscapes, and this is a motif in that seems to find its way into my work. I am fascinated with the relationship between spatiality and physicality, and game engines provide an excellent tool for experimenting with the actual and the pretended landscape, and the fine line between them. As *Don't Quit Your Daydream* is a commentary on the constructed landscape, it made sense to me to create it from scratch. *Veøy* was different, as a very im-

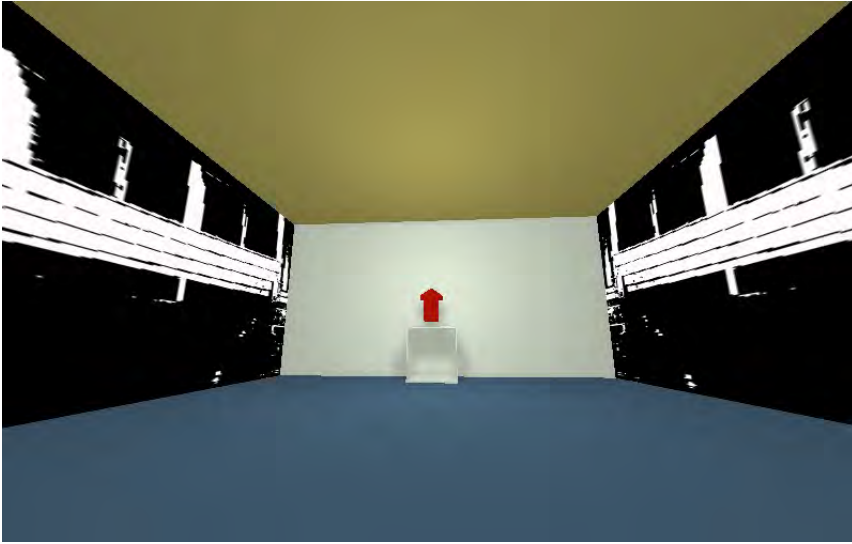


Figure 4.19: Screenshot from *Don't Quit Your Daydream*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2008.

portant component of the work is the physical relation to an actual place that is represented in the form of a game world.

4.9 You Flee From Combat (2010)

You Flee From Combat is a piece that was first published in the journal OEI in 2010 in printed form (see Figure 4.20). It was later shown in a very different format and setting on two occasions as a live performance.²² The starting point for this work in material terms was the game *Aardwolf*, called a MUD game (Multi-User Dungeon), which means that it is an on-line game where the game world is shared and explored by many users at the same time.²³ What is particular about *Aardwolf* is that it is purely text-based and as such represents a type of MUD common prior to technological developments that permitted graphics. *Aardwolf* represents in text a formidable world that in many ways represents a game space similar to the very popular game *World of Warcraft* (2004), with the difference that all events and graphic representations consist of plain text de-

22. Arne Kjell Vikhagen, *You Flee From Combat*, Mixed media, August 2010, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/53864>.

23. *Aardwolf*, *Aardwolf MUD*, 1996—, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.aardwolf.com>.


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mån 30 nov 2009 17.07.35> You flee from combat!
mån 30 nov 2009 17.10.27> You flee from combat!
mån 30 nov 2009 17.14.34> You flee from combat!
mån 30 nov 2009 17.21.04> You flee from combat!
tis 1 dec 2009 22.42.12> You flee from combat!
tor 3 dec 2009 01.17.10> You flee from combat!
tis 8 dec 2009 04.03.00> You flee from combat!
tis 8 dec 2009 04.13.45> You flee from combat!
tis 8 dec 2009 04.26.05> You flee from combat!
fre 11 dec 2009 13.57.12> You flee from combat!
fre 11 dec 2009 18.34.57> You flee from combat!
fre 11 dec 2009 21.07.27> You flee from combat!
mån 14 dec 2009 17.01.05> You flee from combat!
fre 18 dec 2009 12.38.02> You flee from combat!
fre 18 dec 2009 17.59.19> You flee from combat!

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Figure 4.20: Excerpt from *You Flee From Combat*, Arne Kjell Vikhagen, 2010. The log files are filtered through specific searches which groups the same happening across time.

scriptions.²⁴ Through descriptions and textual-graphical representations known as AASCII-art, the player navigates through the game world whilst solving puzzles and finishing quests.

What made me interested in working with a multi-user dungeon game like *Aardwolf* was exactly this textual way of playing. *Aardwolf*'s event universe is only represented by textual descriptions, and therefore you get an almost exaggeratedly clear description of what is happening, something that strikes me as almost autistic in its directness. The textual representation is both the act that the player makes and the narrative representation of it at the same time. In this piece I am using the log files from my own play, a bit similar to *Too Close for Comfort*, with the difference that the result here is a running text and not an animation. *Aardwolf* permits storing of log files from the game, which over time becomes quite extensive. As such they are complete in the sense that they record everything that goes on in the game, no more, no less. The log files from about three months of playing *Aardwolf* later formed the base for the work *You Flee From Combat*. I made specific searches in the log file where I excerpted the most significant events and placed them alongside each other as a

24. *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard Entertainment, 2005—, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/>.

way to draw out the repetitiveness of the events.²⁵ At times the direct texts in aggregate form become almost absurd and traumatic. As in *Too Close for Comfort* I set these texts against a parallel representation to set these in contrast to each other: I chose to work with visual representations of text, so-called ASCII art, where images and animations appear as letters and characters instead of pixels. As a parallel, I chose a film sequence from Jan Mazoch's ski jump crash in Zacopane in 2007. The connection between *Aardwolf* and this film sequence might seem a bit far fetched. The reason why I chose this particular sequence has to do with the performance level the ski jump represents and the real consequences the crash has—as opposed to the *Aardwolf* game world. The real event, despite the stylistic representation, is set against the pseudo-events taking place in *Aardwolf*. What used to be actual events, both in Zacopane and in *Aardwolf*'s virtual world are neither the one nor the other anymore, but a composition in itself that exists on its own terms.

When *You Flee From Combat* is presented as a live presentation the work takes a different character, since the contrast between film sequence and the texts from *Aardwolf* converge over time. The film from Mazoch's crash is repeated all the time while the excerpts of the log files are layered on top of the film while constantly changing. The representation is not textual any more, but visual and performative. The performative element shifts the focus from what has happened to what happens now. In my opinion, the piece lost much of the comedy and absurdity that the textual form created.

4.10 Concluding Remarks

The aim for this chapter has been to describe the artistic works making up part of this project and to show how playability in different ways and to varying degrees has been a component in my work, either directly through interaction from the viewer as in *Epicenter* or *Veøy*, or indirectly through the acts of others, as in *Too Close for Comfort* and *You Flee From Combat*. It is perhaps useful to emphasise the role they play in the larger scheme of things. The artworks have at least two roles: firstly, they are in themselves examples of different ways to work with play and games in art. From machinima animations to text-based live presentations, they

25. The searches were so-called grep searches, which refers to a unix command (grep) that finds a text or an expression and returns the entire lines within which the text was found.

[illegible]

4 Exhibited Works

are works of Game Art in their own way, and as such they are case studies that show how art can inherit rule systems and aesthetics from games, as well as playability. But in a sense they are also ‘origin stories,’ as they have contributed to the formulation of the main inquiries of the project as a whole. Playability emerged as an increasingly fascinating aspect as I discovered the elusiveness of the state of play. As a result of the development of the work, I have gradually come to realise that the relation between art and playability is problematic, having in turn led to the key question posed in this text: can a work of art maintain a state of play and still maintain its agency as a work of art? The next chapter is concerned with exactly this problem.

5 Art and the Concept of Play

Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play.

Heraclitus

This chapter addresses a question that has become more important as the work has progressed, which is whether or not play as an activity, or play as an attitude, can be sustained within a work of art—that is, can a work of art maintain a state of play and at the same time exercise critique? Or to put it other words, how can one and the same artwork maintain a state of play and still claim agency as a work of art? And lastly, on what does the state of play depend: the attitude of the player, the agency of the work of art, or the activity of playing? Or should we support claims made by for instance Ernst Cassirer, regarding the relation between art and play:

Artistic imagination always remains sharply distinguished from that sort of imagination which characterizes our play activity. In play we have to do with simulated images which may become so vivid and impressive as to be taken for realities. To define art as a mere sum of such simulated images would indicate a very meager conception of its character and task. What we call ‘*aesthetic semblance*’ is not the same phenomenon that we experience in games of illusion. Play gives us illusive images; art gives us a new kind of truth—a truth not of empirical things but of pure forms.¹

I aim to give some nuance to Cassirer’s stance, investigating what it means for art to have a ludic component: in this chapter, I question whether a work of art is really able to appropriate a state of play, or, as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, a ‘mode of being of play,’ without losing its

1. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (Yale University Press, 1944), 164.

agency. By agency I am referring to the intention vested within the work of art, and the artwork's ability to pass on its intention. I prefer to use the word *agency* in this context to describe that in works of art which makes us act.² Art has agency in the sense that the social function of art relies on the ability of an artwork to make us act, to make us reflect or relate to the world in a specific way. For the sake of the following discussion on play and the agency of art, my arguments are based on the presupposition that art is socially significant, and that a work of art, whether is it a physical object or not, has the ability to convey social significance through the subject's aesthetic experience. What is interesting for our discussion is the question of what happens when play is introduced into the mix, as in our case with Game Art. Is the state of play so unrestrained that it is unable to be critical, or is Game Art in fact mimicking play in order to serve its own agenda? And how is the role of the viewers, and their level of attention, important for the ability of a work of art to maintain a state of play?

5.1 The State of Play

What does 'a state of play' mean in this context? I will look at several different ways to describe this, but emphasise that there is not a given definition that gives a complete description. As we will see later, Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to the 'mode of being of play,' Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to 'flow,' and Magnus Ullén uses the term 'interactivity.'³

2. I am aware of the debate concerning the use of agency to describe objects, and it is beyond the scope of this text to position my use of agency within that discussion. My intention is not to ascribe life to inanimate objects, or even that works of art needs to be objects. My intention is to capture that which is conveyed in an aesthetic experience, in the broadest sense. It should also be noted that there is a potential conflict between an investment in the institutional theory of art—art is what is designated as art within certain institutional frames—and the suggestion that art has a specific agency qua art. However, this may be resolved by proposing that in the designation of art as art—via institutional processes—the work is accorded a specific agency which does not have to be construed as immanent to the work. There is still a tension however, in suggesting that play in some way is resistant to the institutional capture of a work as art. But it is precisely this tension that the thesis as a whole attempts to navigate, without creating a simplistic dichotomy. Tim Ingold describes agency in relation to action in a way that I have used as a framework for my use of this work. See: Ingold, *Making*, 91–108.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, trans. from the German by Joel Weinheimer and Donald G. Marshall (1975; London, New York: Continuum, 2004); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper Perennial Modern

They all have something in common, albeit with different purposes for their investigations, as I have mine.

Ludic components in a work of art is easy to produce but difficult to control. Let us consider *The Model—A Model for a Qualitative Society* (1968), a work by Palle Nielsen, where Moderna Museet in Stockholm was turned into a playground for children (see Figure 5.1). Whereas the work itself surely was able to offer a state of play for the children that took part in the work, it could be something else for the viewers to observe it and to contemplate it as a work of art. The state of play does not necessarily transfer from *act* to *reflection*. The children in the work—as beautiful and playful as it is to observe the free play of children—are the main component of what the title of the piece also implies: a *model* for those who do not play. The intention of the work was, among other things, to point to alternative models of society, and to remind the audience that there are other, perhaps more attractive, ways to model our society. Tim Stott describes it this way:

The promise of freedom to be found in play is very much at the centre of Palle Nielsen’s claims for *The Model*, and recurs in much of the debate and criticism prompted by it. Except that here it is the freely chosen play of children that is to be observed, as a model of free activity for those who do not play. Lars Bang Larsen writes that *The Model* completed “art’s radical promises,” as it used the museum to construct what Nielsen called a “communicating environment” in which participation was not simply encouraged but necessary to the completion of the exhibition.⁴

The participation that Nielsen relies on in *The Model* is a proxy for the observing audience, for which the work is intended. The work has a clear distinction between the participants and the observers—here I want to emphasise my position that the agency of art and the state of play are not necessarily achievable at the same time, or for the same audience. *The Model* is a successful work if the aim is to represent the state of play through the participation of children in an environment that encourages

Classics (New York: Harper, 2009); Magnus Ullén, “Masturbation as a Mode of Reading: Towards a Conception of the Orphaned Texts of Postmodernity,” in *Carriages and Computers: Aesthetic Technologies in Literature from the 18th to the 21st Century*, ed. Gunnar Foss and Yngve Sandhei Jacobsen (Tapir Academic Press, 2009).

4. Stott, *Play and Participation in Contemporary Arts Practices*, 19.



Figure 5.1: The Model—A Model for a Qualitative Society, Palle Nielsen, 1968.

play—albeit in a museum—and to put this representation in relation to, or against, the mindset of the general audience. The work relies on ‘play by proxy,’ in that the audience is able to identify themselves with the playing children so as to evoke a similar experience. If they do, will the work also have agency? Tim Stott describes the form of participation in the Model in this way:

It is clear, then, that in the case of *The Model* play constitutes an optimal form of participation, a form that offers more egalitarian, provisional, and ‘qualitative types of sociability.’ Again, players discover a degree of ‘embodied agency’ rarely found elsewhere.⁵

The unfolding of play can certainly offer itself indirectly to the observer, just as a game can be shared between players and bystanders—after all, this is partly the joy of watching sport events—but the mode of participation offered in *The Model* is specific for the visitors that are playing, whereas the general audience become the observers of the result of the playing, which in turn is intended to represent the alternative

5. Stott, *Play and Participation in Contemporary Arts Practices*.

models of society, free norms of behaviour, lack of hierarchies, and so on. This double perspective, the kids playing while the viewers observe them, links to Claire Bishop's idea of the double ontological status of participatory art:

In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels—to participants and to spectators—the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew.⁶

However, in *The Model* I am doubtful that the intention of the work was directed at the playing children, who were in this case the participants. Whether the playing children were 'proxies' for an observing audience or not, there is no doubt that *The Model* has a ludic component, which means there is something for the viewer to do, or the viewers are themselves activating the work as participants, players, or as activated spectators.⁷ Game Art is often playable—such as in earlier mentioned works *Untitled Game* by JODI, or *Museum Meltdown* by Thorsson and Bernstrup, as well as a few of my own works, such as *...and then you die!* and *The Big Ifs ...*—even if they are usually not games as such. The ways these artworks enforce rules are different from games. To put these works in context, we can use Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman categorisations of play into three categories, *game play*, *ludic activities*, and *being playful*. *Game play* is the category that is the most rule-based, and would be at first glance the category where *Untitled Game* would belong.⁸ But upon closer inspection, it appears to be more open-ended and playful. For example, *Untitled Game* at first gives the impression of a rigid, rule-based activity of *game play* but it is in fact a subversive negation. The strict mechanics of movement and progression are present, but they cannot be used for anything that will sustain a working rule system. In fact, it is the dysfunctional rule system itself, or rather the viewer's inability to abide

6. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2012), 284.

7. See the discussion about activation and decentring from page 14 and onwards.

8. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2004), 303.

by the rules enforced through this system, that is the main component of the work.

5.2 Play and Agency

When I started working with Game Art, I presumed that a work of art that maintains a state of play could also maintain agency. In this line of thinking, a work of art should be able to convey or constitute purpose for the viewer, or the other way around, depending on the level of participation and activation of the viewer with the work.⁹ As a result of my work with the practical realisation of playable art, I have become sceptical to this position, and as a consequence this chapter puts forth a rather sceptical view toward the relation between art and play. The key question is whether play can have agency, and if that agency is compatible with the agency of art. As an artist, it is interesting for me to know how far you can go into play before art has to let go for pleasure and freedom of your faculties to take over—that is, where the work of art ceases to carry or convey criticality and intention from the artist's point of view—and if a work of art of this kind can empower its participants, players, or viewers with insights of aesthetic experiences rather than merely being a temporal site for pleasure and flow.

There are several useful perspectives to provide understanding of the relation between art and play, but they are disparate and difficult to compare with accuracy. Firstly, it is useful to make a distinction between the attitude of play and the activity of play, as this gives nuance to our understanding of play. Secondly, we need to investigate what it means for art to have agency, in that the supposed agency of art is arguably at stake if our idea of play hinges on it being 'free.' In addition, aspects such as modes of attention, states of flow, distraction, boredom, euphoria, catharsis, and epiphany all describe specific experiences that relate to play in one way or another. I will focus in on flow and modes of attention, as they are particularly important for the understanding of play as an attitude.

I also want to draw a historical parallel that relates to Kant's term 'free play' as an example of how something seemingly open-ended and unrestrained—the free play of the faculties of cognition—also needs to

9. As previously mentioned, I use the term viewer to describe the receiver of a work of art, whether this is a participant, viewer, user, player, producer, or similar. I do not intend to reduce the aesthetic experience to something that only concerns spectatorship.

fulfil a purpose: instead of ‘bringing objects under concepts,’ free play offers a non-conceptual way to understand objects, through disinterested pleasure.¹⁰ Brent Kalar formulates Kant’s ‘free play’ in this way:

...Kant needs a way to differentiate the harmony of the faculties underlying the pleasure in the beautiful from the harmony of the faculties underlying ordinary perception. His [Kant’s] way of doing this is to claim that, in the aesthetic case of harmony, the imagination is in ‘free play,’ whereas in the ordinary case it is not. This move gives rise, however, to a major problem in the interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics: how are we to understand this metaphor of ‘free play?’ What does it mean for the imagination to be both free, and yet ‘in harmony’ with the understanding? How exactly is aesthetic perception of the beautiful *like*, and how is it *unlike* regular empirical perception?¹¹

Play as an unrestrained and unencumbered activity rhymes poorly with the idea that play should accomplish something as intentional as artistic mediation. Katja Kwastek articulates the problem further: “...one possible divergence is seen in the question as to whether, and to what extent, artistic statements are founded on an inherent idea or intentionality—Scheuerl’s ‘value’—that would differentiate them from play.”¹² According to Kwastek, there have been several developments within contemporary art that would seem to support a move towards play: the dematerialisation of art, the increased importance of the viewer, and the addition of performative and interactive elements.¹³ We can also see that a genre of computer games has developed in ways that makes them more open-ended and less dependent on rule systems. This development has also led to discussions within the game community about whether or not these new and more open ended games are, in fact, games at all.

Perhaps the best example is *Proteus* (2013) (see Figure 5.2), an open-ended game seemingly without any specific goals apart from exploring

10. Hannah Ginsborg, “Kant’s Aesthetics and Teleology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2014, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2014), accessed August 1, 2017.

11. Brent Kalar, *The Demands of Taste in Kant’s Aesthetics*, Continuum Studies in Philosophy (London ; New York: Continuum, 2006), 38.

12. Katja Kwastek, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013), 74.

13. *Ibid.*, 72.

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an island whilst experiencing the passing of time through the shifts of seasons.¹⁴ After the game was released to the public on the online video game store Steam, some customers were disappointed. They claimed *Proteus* was not a game, and got a refund. The following is an excerpt from a discussion thread on the Proteus forum on Steam Communities, to exemplify a typical response to the Proteus game:

The point of this ‘game’? I understand it’s supposed to be some artsy ‘game’, but AS FAR AS I CAN TELL this literally has no point other than to walk around. The problem with that being the point of the game is that there is nothing interesting to see as you can’t really interact with most things. For example, I found a ring of stones shaped like animals but could not interact or do anything with them. The only thing I could interact with was the teleporting things, and all they did was bring me to a new area with nothing to do. No, I don’t want to shoot things as some of the posts defending this game suggest; but I at least expect a game to have an objective or goal of some sort. Without that, I don’t see a reason for continuing to play.¹⁵

Open ended games like *Proteus* are good examples of games that are less goal oriented, relying more on exploration and the joy of being immersed in a different world. *Proteus* offers an environment attuned more closely to a state of play, than playing a game with a clear outcome. With this in mind, we can again focus on the difference between *the activity of play* and *the attitude of play*, described in detail in Olli Tapio Leino’s dissertation “Emotions in Play”:

...if we acknowledge that play refers to both an activity and an attitude, and ...in order to learn about the latter instead of only about its symptoms we need to adopt the player’s perspective, [and] we may conclude that no attempt that looks at computer game play from a perspective “external” to the playing subject can ever achieve a full and faithful description of computer game play.¹⁶

14. Ed Key and David Kanaga, *Proteus*, Curve Studios, 2013.

15. “The point of this “game”?” Steam Community, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://steamcommunity.com/app/219680/discussions/0/810925580048810080/>.

16. Leino, “Emotions in Play,” 70.



Figure 5.2: Screenshot from *Proteus*, designed by Ed Key and David Kanaga, 2013.

The separation between the activity and the attitude of play is thus most useful. For instance, it adds a layer to how we understand our engagement in play. The kind of engagement often seen in computer games can not always be approached in a way that qualifies as play in either Gadamer's sense of the word—as something that needs to be taken seriously—nor in Huizinga's terms—as something that marks the transition between ordinary life and the 'magic circle'. Through the learning of skills and by obtaining experience in the state of play, the player loses the kind of attention required to engage in play in the sense that it is considered from the point of view of game studies. Instead, the player engages in 'play by proxy' so to speak, play as routine, whether the player is building up resources, honing her skills, preparing for battle, and so on. These activities are pursued at the same time as the player is doing something else, a mindset that is far from the all-consuming state of play. When play becomes routine it detaches from the attitude of play, even though an inexperienced player would have a completely different experience if she were in the same situation. The experienced player has lost the attitude of play, and is in fact only left with the activity of play. It might look like play to an external observer, but the player is not in a state of play—she is only performing the activity of play.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi uses the term 'flow' to describe a state of com-

plete involvement in an activity of this kind.¹⁷ Flow is similar to a state of play, but arguably is different to it in some cases. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as needing ‘clear goals every step of the way,’ something not necessarily required in play. Distracted play occurs when players are unwilling or unable to meet challenges with the skills they have, and so either experience anxiety (too difficult) or boredom (too easy). These thresholds develop over time as skill increases.¹⁸ The ‘flow channel’ describes the balance between a player’s skills and their attention to the game. As the players develop their skills, the game needs to respond with more difficult tasks in kind to foil the player and keep them in a state of flow, unless they fall out of flow through boredom, as in distracted play, or anxiety, when the game is too difficult.

5.3 The Attitude of Play and Distracted Play

Experienced players can become distracted from play through routine and skill, and they will need something challenging in order to approach play with the attitude that it needs—from Gadamer’s perspective—in order to return to the state of play. This could in my opinion explain the popularity of games like Terry Cavanagh’s computer game *Super Hexagon* (2012) (see Figure 5.3): which manages to occupy the player and immerse them totally in play, albeit for a limited time since the game is very difficult.¹⁹ *Super Hexagon* is a good example, successfully capturing the player’s attention, but in the flow channel it keeps the player hanging on the ropes, arguably on the anxiety side of the scale. The game requires the players’ full attention, and their motor skills need to be excellent to make the game last for more than even thirty seconds (see Figure 5.3).

Another example similar to *Super Hexagon*, but far more extreme, is *PainStation* (2003) (see Figure 5.4). It is a piece of Game Art by the artist group *//////////fur////* which consists of Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff.²⁰ It achieves the same state of deep attention as *Superhexagon*, taking it

17. Salisbury John and Tomlinson Penda, “Contextualizing Flow in Games,” in *DiGRA ཊ - Proceedings of the 2014 DiGRA International Conference* (August 2014), 3–4, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/digra2014_submission_59.pdf.

18. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.

19. Terry Cavanagh, *Super Hexagon*, 1985.

20. *//////////fur////*, *PainStation*, Arcade game, 2003; David Parisi, “Shocking Grasps: An Archaeology of Electrotactile Game Mechanics,” *Gamestudies.org* 02 (2013), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/parisi>.

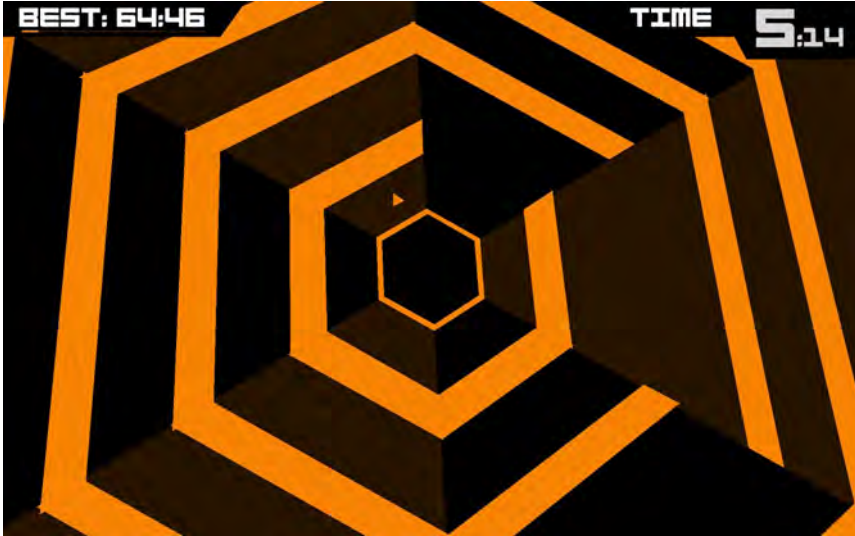


Figure 5.3: Screenshot from *Super Hexagon*, Terry Cavanagh, 2012. The objective is to avoid the yellow lines from collapsing towards the centre by moving the triangle left or right. Only highly skilled players manage to play the game for more than sixty seconds.

a bit further. The classic video game *Pong* merges with a console that physically punishes the players in three different ways—burns, whips, and electric shocks—once the ball hits the symbols corresponding to the respective punishment. Later on in the game, punishment is offered for all kinds of arbitrary reasons, and players cannot avoid them, no matter how good they are at *Pong*. The win condition also has nothing to do with *Pong*—the winner is simply the player who can withstand the most pain. When the game is set to hard mode, the game will sooner or later injure the player’s hand—especially the heat, which inevitably results in blisters, and the whip, which will result in a bloody wound if the game goes on too long. *PainStation* is an interesting Game Art piece, since it challenges the idea that games are pretend. Instead, it puts the viewer at risk of physical injury, and by doing so it challenges the viewer’s expectations to remain physically intact in their meeting with a work of art.

What kind of attention is required from us to play games like *Super Hexagon* or *PainStation*? Games like these provide good examples where the intentionality and the mode of attention of the player is very different from, for instance, the act of reading. It is different from reading a



Figure 5.4: PainStation, //////////fur///, 2003.

book or relating to a narrative structure, as found in storytelling games. In the latter case, the game functions as a narrative device with ludic elements. But in *Super Hexagon* or *PainStation*, the mode of engagement is different from the reader in their interaction with the ‘text,’ and disrupts the relation between the text and its discourse. It involves a level of physical activity and intervention that extends far beyond turning the pages of a book or a simple impulse-response ludic interaction found in many games. The interaction is the whole point for the reader to engage with the text. In short, as in David Myers words: “Playing is to games what reading is to books”.²¹ It is interesting to note that this relies on the players’ intentions: the same text can be met without this kind of engagement, and this particular mode of reading would thus not occur—in the way that a game theorist plays games for the purpose of analysing them, or the way the art critic approaches art, prevents them from engaging in the way the game is intended to be engaged.²²

With this perspective in mind, we can understand how the act of playing a game has purposes stretching beyond the act of reading. The motivation for the act is connected to the joy of playing, of being in a state

21. David Myers, “The Video Game Aesthetic: Play as Form,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (Routledge, 2009), 45.

22. Jesse Schell, *The art of Game Design: a Book of Lenses* (Amsterdam ; Boston: Elsevier/Morgan Kaufmann, 2008).

of play. The interactivity thus stems from the player's motivation and intention to indulge in play—independent upon how the character relates to the storytelling of the game. The pleasure of *reading* a computer game is not an act of reading, but an act of playing. In fact, play does not claim to represent something, but rather is self-sufficient in itself. What really takes place when we play games is that games claim their own discourse, which at the same time makes them unable to represent a discourse, something once again dependent on the player's intention. The player evokes actuality by interacting with the discourse itself instead of its representation. Magnus Ullén describes this with the term *interactuality*:

I propose we call this more limited cognitive space *interactuality*, by which term I want to suggest that it is generated by a set of discourses which do not so much represent actuality, as bring an actuality forth by making the reader interact with the discourse at hand as if that discourse constituted a reality in its own right.²³

In this way, what we think of as a discourse is simply not there when we 'read' a game by playing it—discourse is *constituted* by the reader and not *presented* to the reader. As mentioned earlier, we can certainly *read* games in a traditional way and make narratological analyses based on what we read, since we can look at how players create a string of events when they play a computer game. Daniel Vella formulates this difference in the following:

This already implies an important insight into the nature of games as aesthetic objects: namely, that it is not the experience of perceiving a performance, but the experience of performing the act, which is what matters—and, therefore, that it is not the result of the performance that is the object to be grasped aesthetically (the experienced movement of the dance), but the act *itself*, in its intrinsic value (the experience of *performing* the movement).²⁴

The analysis of the 'experience of the performance' will bring our understanding only so far, since we will miss the significance in this particular mode of reading. The intention to play a game is not to produce

23. Ullén, "Masturbation as a Mode of Reading," 108.

24. Vella, "The Ludic Muse: The Form of Games as Art," 70–71.

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meaning, but in Ullén's words to *consume* it: "Far from producing meaning, this is a mode of reading [in] which meaning is *consumed*."²⁵ We can also find support from Katja Kwastek on this matter, in her discussion on interactive art and how it relates to play:

Interactive art does use effects of illusion, immersion, and flow. It does reside in artificial realms, as does play. But it goes a step further by provoking disruptions that induce conscious reflection on the process of interaction itself. When there is not only awareness of artificiality but also explicit examination of its effects, the result is a mental distance to the object of aesthetic interest, even when the object of aesthetic interest is one's own behaviour. This reflective component of art reception is the point at which art and play part ways.²⁶

The key here is the distance that is required for the reception of art, which is lacking in play. And that is the point I am making. For Kwastek, and for me as well, there is a lack of distance in the state of play that, for better or for worse, obstructs our ability to meet artworks with aesthetic distance—that is, unless neither our concept of art nor our idea of play can be adapted to fit. For instance, Daniel Vella suggests that we redefine how we think of an aesthetic experience:

The purposiveness of the player's ludic actions, together with their determination by the material objects they address, would still appear to constitute a radical challenge to the idea of the player's engagement with a game as having an aesthetic character. It remains necessary to rethink our notion of the aesthetic in such a way as to be able to contain under its aegis a relation to an external object which is not only defined by its purposive and instrumental character, but in which, as Fink suggests, purposiveness and instrumentality are the inherent existential dimensions of what is brought into aesthetic presentation.²⁷

Furthermore, Vella suggests there is an inside/outside view of the player perspective that constitutes aesthetic experiences of games:

25. Ullén, "Masturbation as a Mode of Reading," 108.

26. Kwastek, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*, 160.

27. Vella, "The Ludic Muse: The Form of Games as Art," 77.

The conceptualisation of the aesthetic nature of games has thereby led this investigation to the threshold of a crucial insight—namely, that the player’s experience of a game is determined by her simultaneous inhabitation of two distinct phenomenal standpoints: a perspective internal to the game-world, from which ludic actions are taken in a teleological orientation towards the task set by the game, and an external perspective from which the game—and the player’s own actions within it—is viewed in the aesthetic mode defined by critical distance and a disinterested, contemplative attitude.²⁸

What is required from the attitude of the player is to simultaneously be inside and outside at the same time. It gets even more intriguing if we take the spatial components into consideration: *where* is all this taking place? For instance, the ‘magic circle’ is useful for our discussion on the attention and intentionality of the player, but the notion of a separate space that operates under agreed-upon rules has been contested in recent game studies.²⁹ In this context, it is not seen as capable of describing the different varieties of how computer games operate in the real world. It has also been contested as a viable term to describe the specific features of computer games, either by the way it separates the world from games or by the way and extent it is dependent upon a mutually agreed upon set of rules.³⁰ Game theorist Gordon Calleja for instance, chooses to focus on player engagement and intentionality instead:

A dichotomous boundary view of player involvement tells us very little about the nature of the experience, and more importantly it hides the fact that game experiences vary hugely among different games, different players of those games and each specific sitting. By leaving behind an either/or perspective and focusing on the specificities of the individual en-

28. Ibid., 81.

29. Stenros Jaakko, “In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play,” in *DiGRA Nordic: Proceedings of 2012 International DiGRA Nordic Conference* (2012), accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/12168.43543.pdf>; Michael Liebe, “There is no Magic Circle: On the Difference between Computer Games and Traditional Games,” in *Conference proceedings of The Philosophy of Computer Games 2008*, ed. Stephan Günzel, Michael Liebe, and Dieter Mersch (Potsdam: University Press, 2008), 324–341.

30. Consalvo, *Cheating*, 7.

gement, we open up for our inquiry to a richer understanding of the feedback loop between player and game that is not normatively pre-determined by simplistic binaries.³¹

A similar approach has been proposed by Emmanoel Ferreira and Thiago Falcão as well, with the difference that they aim to revise the concept of the magic circle, or modernise it to make it relevant for computer games.³² The magic circle is seen here as a form of mediation component that in fact opens up a dialogue between reality and game space. That makes it possible for the player to distinguish between game and reality, and the way to negotiate between these as a single universe. It becomes a framework where we can describe the *leakage* between the game world and the real world.

5.4 The Magic Circle, Flow and Aesthetic Distance

We can also connect the idea of the magic circle to the way we think about art in general, and how a work of art operates in terms of the work's relation to its surroundings. The term itself is sometimes used in discussions concerning the space of art.³³ What is important here is perhaps not the actual use of the same term, even though that is interesting in itself as it suggests that artistic and ludic activities have something in common, but to rather see it as a need to describe certain (not all) works of art's self-enclosure, or the space in which they operate, as something separate from the ordinary world—just as with games. That is, not separate from the 'real' world, as the magic circle can be just as real, it is just that

31. Gordon Calleja, "Erasing the Magic Circle," in *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, ed. John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim, and Tarjei Mandt Larsen, vol. 7, Philosophy of Engineering and Technology (Springer Netherlands, 2012).

32. Ferreira Emmanoel and Falcão Thiago, "Through the Looking Glass: Weavings between the Magic Circle and Immersive Processes in Video Games," in *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory* (Brunel University, September 2009), 2, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.45173.pdf>.

33. For example, it is used in this passage written by Wendy Steiner: "This interference and complication in reference creates art's self enclosure—the 'magic circle' around the artwork that produces an intensity and breadth and over-determination of meaning seldom found elsewhere." Wendy Steiner, *The scandal of pleasure: art in an age of fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 76.

different rules govern that ‘mode of being.’ The tension lies in the difference between the rule systems and what is inside or outside the magic circle: “The irritation provoked by the clash between different rule systems forms part of the aesthetic experience of interactive art.”³⁴ Katja Kwastek elaborates on this aspect at length in her discussion about interactive art. For instance, she discusses flow and the difference between play and ‘aesthetic distance,’ which for her is a fundamental condition for aesthetic experience.³⁵ Interactive art challenges this condition, and flow is seen as opposite to aesthetic distance:

Flow is likewise not a stable state; it represents one pole—the opposite to reflective distancing—within the complex processes of aesthetic experience. Once again, even if traditional art forms likewise enable different types of attention and identification, these ambivalences really only manifest themselves in interactive art as a result of the tension that arises between action and reception—as a vacillation between carrying out or refusing to carry out an act, between adherence to the rules and an uninhibited approach to the interaction proposition, between identification and reflection³⁶

Kwastek is onto a very important perspective here, one which rhymes well with my experience working with Game Art. There is a tension between identification and reflection. Kwastek goes further; what games have in common with interactive art is that they cannot provide aesthetic distance, which is important for our understanding of Game Art as well: “The reason is that interactive art’s predication on the physical activity of the recipient contradicts a fundamental condition to which the possibility of aesthetic experience is usually linked: that of aesthetic distance. The aesthetic object—according to the prevailing theory—is constituted only in the contemplative act of the viewer.”³⁷

Are the magic circle and aesthetic distance really two different ways to distinguish between play, art, and actual life? How important is this distinction between what happens in life as we know it, and where does ‘real life’ let go for the sake of aesthetic distance? Is there a dialectics between, say, the ‘mode of being of play’, and ‘real life’? And could this

34. Kwastek, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*, 76.

35. *Ibid.*, xviii.

36. *Ibid.*, 79.

37. *Ibid.*, xviii.

dialectic be compared to ‘aesthetic distance’ and ‘real life?’ If so, the discussion about the magic circle and aesthetic distance really just becomes about how play and art operates at different modes, or polarities, within those two dialectics, as understood in the following statement by Claire Bishop: “The most striking projects that constitute the history of participatory art unseat all of the polarities on which this discourse is founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art) but not with the goal of collapsing them. In so doing, they hold the artistic and social critiques in tension.”³⁸

5.5 The Seriousness of Play

If the micro-utopia of the artwork is the same or similar to what the magic circle is for games, it is important to know if we need to make a separation between the playful and play: is a work of art made in a ‘ludic spirit’ or through a playful process the same as a work of art that maintains a state of play? To answer this question, I will discuss Gadamer’s concept of play more closely, and the seemingly paradoxical relation it has to seriousness. As we will see, the seriousness of play is key for the mode of being of play which in our case is similar to maintaining a state of play, as it addresses the attitude of play in a similar way.

Gadamer discusses the seriousness of play in his book *Truth and method*. While play can never be serious as such, Gadamer describes instead an immanent seriousness in play that is not fulfilled before play is treated as not serious: “Play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself in his play.”³⁹ The attitude of the player is always directed towards play’s own seriousness, which is obtained by treating play as not serious. For Gadamer, this is a crucial property of play that accounts for its importance: play can never be objectified by the playing subject since it would then immediately lose its own seriousness and purpose. Furthermore, the player can never be aware of play’s own seriousness either, since it can never be grasped through the experience of play. The important outcome of this relation between play and the player is that the object of inquiry is neither the player’s experience nor the player’s reflection on what play is, but rather it is that play itself should be investigated, or what Gadamer calls the *mode of being of play*. Gadamer inverts the rela-

38. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 277–278.

39. Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 103.

tion between the player and play by giving play the role as the subject. The player is objectified, and play itself is independent upon the attention of the player.

Gadamer's view on play as the subject and player as object is quite different from the philosophical tradition from Kant and onward, which puts the subject in the centre and where the subject is the instigator of play, and the dynamics of play are subordinate to the subject as a latent instrument waiting to serve the subject whenever it pleases. With the right state of mind, a harmony between imagination and reason, the subject could enter a state of play for its own enjoyment. This view on the dynamics of play is very different from Gadamer's view. Gadamer opposes the subjectification of play, and he is eager to denounce the importance of attitude and state of mind for those playing. Play is rather the "...mode of being of the work of art itself."⁴⁰ It is neither constituted by us nor is it there for our enjoyment. Gadamer does not look to the player and his intentions or need for recreation or gratification, but his attention is towards the seriousness of play in itself, a seriousness that is fulfilled if the player has valid intentions: "The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object."⁴¹ The player's role is thus secondary, or more like a catalyst, a way to instigate play's own purpose. The subjective expression is transposed from the playing subject and makes it into play itself.

The secondary role of the player makes it once more necessary to distinguish between play as an activity and the attitude or intention of the player. The understanding of play in a work of art comes from the immanent analysis of the work of art itself. What kind of implications does this have in contrast to the subjectification of the experience of play by Kant and others? Most importantly, this changes the object of investigation from the subject and over to play itself. What goes on inside us when we play is of secondary concern to the more primary function of play. This not only reduces the player to a puppet, or catalyst, but it also makes Gadamer able to connect the concept of play to higher purposes.

The focus on play itself as containing the key to its own essence is parallel to Gadamer's view of art and its relation to aesthetic consciousness. The "mode of being of art" is primary to the person experiencing it, and the work of art is considered the subject in that relation. As we have seen, this is similar to his argument on play. The work of art is what changes a

40. *Ibid.*, 102.

41. *Ibid.*, 103.

person's experience and not the other way around. Art and play operate in similar ways, with similar prerequisites: they are both primary.

The motivation to play is rooted in the desire to erase boundaries between being and playing, similar to what Gadamer refers to as a state where there is a mimetic relation between being and play: there is no image, no metaphor or symbol. Play represents an order of things where there is a repeated movement without goal but just as important without effort or strain: "It happens, as it were, by itself."⁴² The person will experience this as relaxation, removing the "burden of initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence."

Now we are closing in on play's essential function: Gadamer considers play to be a natural process, where the meaning of the subject's play is a pure self-representation, and comes about because the subject is a part of nature.⁴³ The attraction of the game is the same as with play, it is the fascination of the game mastering the players by its rules, and the dissolution of the playing subject on the account of the game as a subject. A game creates a world that is more determined by regulations from within than interaction with the outside world. This means that the subject receives gratification from play just because of its passive relation to the outside world or the playing object. The relation is however not passive in the sense that the outside world and the game world are completely disconnected. On the contrary, it is only through the seemingly disconnected world that a worldly connection can be made—through the simplified game rules we can get a glimpse of the outside world in another light, and create a movement between the two.

According to Gadamer, art can become a representation of truth through the transformation of play into structure. Moreover, art is not determined by the awareness of the subject who experiences it, but rather as "...a part of the *event of being that occurs in presentation*, and belongs essentially to play as play."⁴⁴ The aesthetic attitude is "...more than it knows of itself." For Gadamer, the relation between art and play is vital, and in fact central to how play, as pure self-representation, can achieve manifestation and become "key to ontological explanation."

In our Game Art perspective, the question is whether works of art are capable of maintaining play. The question is then whether such transformations are legitimate, that is, whether it is possible for art to turn into

42. Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 105.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, 115.

play without losing what was intended in the first place? Can play still exist in this way as art? Is it important for Game Art to maintain or offer a state of play within the work of art? Or, as from Gadamer's perspective, could a work of art that maintains a state of play undergo the transformation into structure that is needed to prevent "pure self-representation?"

The previously described work *Death Animations* (2008) by Brody Condon is a relevant example: the common denominator for both expressions—the performative element—is imitated in Condon's performance. Condon imitates behavioural tropes in games and presents these in an art context as art, by instructing dancers to imitate game animations. In artistic works that inherit rule systems of games, the goal is to achieve a separate 'game universe' in the artistic work, which is more complex than if you inherit aesthetic or performative elements such as in *Death Animations*. This is because we then aim to inherit, or simulate, the game's 'magic circle' if you will. We are in other words returning to the relation between art and play when it comes to the way the magic circle operates. How is this then still art? Is this displacement compatible with the game's intentions? Is it compliant with art's intentions? This is really the key question for Game Art, since it concerns the most important and critical relationship between games and art. If we consider Game Art in particular—or art in general—to evoke a magic circle similar to a game, or something that is equivalent, then it is of vital importance whether games or art can operate outside of the magic circle while being in it at the same time.

In Gadamer's words, art represents a transformation into structure, which is arguably a transformation where play does not survive. What is more, play seems to evade agency.⁴⁵

Through the discussion in this chapter, it is apparent that the relation between art and play is complex and sometimes even contradictory. The double logic of both play and art, as in wanting to be inside and outside at the same time, to be unrestrained but yet intentional, makes it difficult to give a clear conclusion. To describe and share the experience of playing a game to others are both simple and complex at the same time. When instead of a game we have a work of ludic art in the mix it becomes even more complicated. Daniel Vella has formulated this in a more fitting way by giving the last word to the ludic form as *action*:

...what facet of our being-in-the-world do games bring for-

45. Huizinga, "The Game design reader," 102.

ward into conscious perception in making us *ludic subjects*? The answer is already apparent ...namely, that if a material invariant can be identified for games as aesthetic objects, it is the set of actions in which the playing of a game unfolds, as experienced not by a detached spectator but by the player in the act of playing. Upon this insight, following the same logic by which Nancy argues that the form of painting isolates the visual zone of our distribution of the sensible, we would reach the conclusion that what ludic form isolates is *action*—it makes of our own actions, as players, an aesthetic object.⁴⁶

Given the flexibility of both art and play in terms of what they can be, to claim that they are working against each in general terms and in every case is unwise, and not what I intend to do. But, I am prepared to claim that as a result of working with Game Art, in the different ways and approaches that I have done within the scope of this project, I have noticed a resistance to make work that offers the state of play to the viewer, as we have discussed this term in relation to Gadamer, and to the notion of flow. And just as important, this was not something I expected from the start, in fact, I had expected this to be an easy match, given all the different ways that play and art are connected.

At the heart of the argument lies the attitude of the player, and to distinguish the attitude from the activity of playing a game. A player can 'go through the motions' and it might look like play, but the player is instead involved in analysis, self-reflection, or is simply bored. Either that or, as in the case of *Super Hexagon* and *PainStation*, the viewer is not permitted to enter a state of flow but is instead kept firmly in a state of anxiety. A third option for Game Art is the narrative device, where the game state offers new and innovative ways for the viewer to take part in a story, and navigate its narrative nodes in ways that differ from reading a text from beginning to end.

In this chapter on play, we have touched upon a number of ways to think about play and how it relates to art, and it is necessary to sum up and connect this discussion to what has become the main claim of this project.

I claim that there is a friction between art and play that makes me doubt that art can maintain its agency as art through play. As a consequence and

46. Vella, "The Ludic Muse: The Form of Games as Art," 75–76.

in terms of 'flow', Game Art with a ludic component tends to avoid 'flow' by staying outside of the flow channel: ludic art gravitates towards anxiety or boredom, or it negates 'flow' altogether through the use of game spaces as narrative devices.

I have reached this conclusion as a result of the artistic process leading up to the works of art that was made as a part of the thesis. It has been strengthened through the study of the concept of play and how it relates to artistic practice. The following are the caveats that apply for this claim: Firstly, the agency of art relies on a theory of art that presumes that a work of art has the ability to convey criticality, to take stance and to mediate intent. Secondly, play in this context refers to the attitude required from the subject to experience the 'mode of being of play' as put forward by Hans-Georg Gadamer, which I equate with flow for the purposes of describing a state of play that is unrestrained in the sense that self-awareness about playing would break play. In other words, play in this sense is an attitude and not an activity.

6 By Way of Conclusion

There are a quite a few reasons why games, play and art are an appropriate field of study within the arts. I observed a shift of interest in the media art field, where artists had begun to use computer games in their work, or simply to make art from computer games. I could connect this development to a similar but earlier development, namely video art. When artists got access to consumer products that made them capable of making videos without costly processes and requirements, or the need to work in large groups, an art form developed that not only utilised the tools from the world of technology, but also inherited the cultural expression from television. Simply put, cheap and accessible technology available from late 1960s and 1970s provided artists with means and purposes to appropriate it, with an emerging visual culture as a result.¹ *The aesthetic material* of video offered mainly two properties: firstly it allows them to appropriate the material in a simple, cheap and effective way without a considerable threshold of costs and technical specialisation, and secondly this material aligns with a wider and commonly shared visual culture that allows for collective sharing between competent peers. The audience was already familiar with the form, and could relate to it as a cultural phenomenon rather than a technical innovation or experiment.

I see all these traits in the relation between Game Art and the consumer access to the game making process which makes it possible to use game design tools without having specialised knowledge, and without the high costs. Other artists use their knowledge from other fields and instead draw inspiration from games in their work with painting, sculpture or installations. This project is based on the premise that Game Art is connected to an aesthetic material which itself derives from a widespread visual culture which has the ability to function as means for an artistic appropriation and cultural expression for those who share this cultural framework.

As for the technical side of Game Art, it shares the situation with media art in general: computer game technologies are constantly undergo-

1. Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3.

ing changes due to technological innovations and the needs to satisfy an ever-increasing market, and what is interesting today will not be relevant tomorrow. New platforms and technical solutions must be constantly learned and mastered by anyone who wish to maintain currency within the field. But what is perhaps most important to emphasise from an artistic point of view is not so much the specific technical framework as the fact that these tools are constantly changing, and that in itself is important to consider. It is the trait that comes with the field. It is the ever-changing technical aspects that are important. For instance, the technological developments of computer game design greatly exceed similar developments within traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture. It is difficult to get an understanding of the inner workings of Game Art, and media art in general, without keeping this in mind. Artists have different ways to approach the technological development. Either they embrace it, or make it their strategy to hold back and for instance deliberately maintain an aesthetic that signals a certain 'pastness' or is aligned with the retro-forms of the technologies invoked because it serves their purpose in the most effective way, or they focus on obsolete technologies. In either way, their material foundation, craftsmanship or artistic skill is not based on mastering a skill or *techne* as such, but it relies on an approach to ever-changing circumstances. It is more about adapting, or to consciously refrain from adapting, to the rapidly changing material developments.

From a more theoretical perspective, the field of game studies have been a very important source for the development of my work, but also in the way I have been thinking about games and play. The study of games, and especially computer games, have matured considerably, and just as with the technological development of game engines and computer hardware, the new ideas in game studies have offered just as many challenges. In the early stages I was interested in how games tell stories, and I studied the narratology strand of game studies. The process of working with the artworks led me to focus less on story and more on the state of play, as this has come to be a very interesting topic: the relation between play and art, from both an artistic and philosophical point of view. In simple terms, I came to the realisation that a certain form of Game Art is not primarily about constructing narratives, but creating means for a state of play. This perspective is just as, if not more, important for the understanding of Game Art than the narrative structure of games. This is the reason why I described the works of Öyvind Fahlström in chapter two.

CIA Monopoly can be better understood when we take into account the ludic component that it offers. The computer version that was made in 2002 made it possible to play the piece without risking wear and tear for very expensive pieces of art, and to give room to the ludic aspect of the work.

Chapter four also discusses the rule-systems of games and how they are put to use in art. In *Play it by Trust* for instance, Yoko Ono makes the rule-system itself a key component of the work: the well-known game of chess and its metaphor of conflict between kings. In *Play it by Trust* it becomes an open-ended game seemingly without the aim of winning the 'war'. In this piece and in other works I discuss in chapter four, I discuss the subversive relation to rules, either from the viewer perspective or the artist perspective. I suggest that the notion of cheating, exploiting, hacking and modding are key to understand Game Art, both from a production and a reception perspective. I argue that if we continue to look at the ludic components of a work of art and by extension assume that the viewer will fully comply to the rule-systems and the state of play offered by the work, we lose the aspects of distracted play, of subversive behaviour and critical attitude. To make this even more complex, we have to include the artists as well, as their intentions are not necessarily in line with what seems to be the promise of the work, just as we discussed in *Play it by Trust* by Yoko Ono, or with *Untitled Arena* by JODI.

The discussion in chapter five concerned the relation between play and art, and specifically how they relate to each other in a ludic work of art. The main discussion concerns whether there is the possibility or not of maintaining a state of play in a work of art, and if there is, how play still permits agency, that is, the ability for art to maintain criticality and intention. Throughout the project phase this has perhaps been the most important question, even in the realisation of my Game Art pieces. Initially, I assumed that the state of play most certainly would be a common component in the making of Game Art, but I have come to see the ludic aspects of games as a far more useful material for artistic expression. Seen through the philosophy of play and the notion of flow, it appears to me that Game Art relates to games and resists the possibility for the viewer to engage in play in the way that I have described it in the previous chapter. Instead, Game Art has other connection to games: it can include sophisticated narrative devices, such as *Veøy* or Machinima pieces such as *Too Close for Comfort* or *Suicide Solutions*, where the viewer can engage in the piece with aesthetic distance through the observing of play

by others. Or, Game Art stay comfortably in the 'boredom' side of the flow channel, such as *Ballpark*, where the work gives plenty of time for adaptation and reflection. Thirdly, we have the Game Art works that makes it hard or impossible to acquire the necessary skills to enable a reasonably stable relationship to the rule-system of the work, and in this way stay on the 'anxiety' side of the flow channel. Examples of work of this kind is *The Big Ifs...*, *PainStation* or *Arena*.

There are still many questions remaining for the future studies of the relations between games, play and art. First and foremost, we need to further understand what is meant by play, and if there is a threshold where the attitude of free play turns into something more directed and governed that allows for aesthetic distance. Or, whether the aesthetic experience of art can be understood in a way so as to allow for the affordance of the state of play without challenging the ability of art to convey criticality. The two perspectives discussed here are firstly directed towards play itself and Gadamer's notion of play as being offered to any subject with the seriousness that is required to engage in play, and secondly towards the attention of the viewer and how the work affords free play. There are several other aspects that should be explored. How does ludic art relate to the difference between the activity of play and the attitude of play? Could we see the activity of play as a way to circumvent the focus on the viewer's mode of engagement and instead just consider what the work provides in terms of ludic engagement? These particular questions are fitting for research that concerns itself with theoretical reflection and practical experimentation, and it has been my intention to demonstrate that the approach represented by this thesis—the artworks produced together with this text—is a fruitful way to investigate the intricate workings of the relation between art and play.

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This project as a whole aims to map and exemplify cases where Game Art successfully inherits rule-systems, aesthetics, spatial and temporal aspects from computer games.

This work has in turn resulted in a provisional response to the question of the possibility for Game Art to successfully create a state of play, whilst still maintain agency as a work of art.

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